



Overcoming Unconscious Biases

Teaching Aid

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Overcoming Unconscious Biases

Everyone has biases, both negative and positive, that affect the way we see the world around us. Many of these biases are conscious (or explicit), but many are unconscious (or implicit) and have the effect of guiding our thoughts, decisions and actions without us being aware of their influence.

All human beings carry unconscious biases. Biases are thoughts and opinions that have been built and strengthened over a lifetime of interacting with family, media, cultural influences and historical narratives. Even everyday language and imagery specific to the communities we live in carry biases. Therefore, identifying and then overcoming our unconscious biases is by no means a simple or easy task. However, there are steps we can take to become more conscious of the biases we hold and to mitigate the subtle effects they have on our behaviour, which in turn influences our life choices.

Bias refers to an “inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair.”

Discrimination¹ is the “unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people”.

SOURCE: *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, ninth edition

Stereotype refers to an “oversimplified image of a certain group of people.”

Prejudice is a “feeling about a group of people or an individual within a group that is based on a stereotype.”

SOURCE: *Addressing Anti-Semitism Through Education: Guidelines for Policymakers*, p. 41.

Teachers have the responsibility and challenge to treat all students equally and promote respect for diversity. In order to meet this challenge, teachers must identify and process their own personal biases. If they do not go through this process of self-reflection, they may unknowingly reinforce stereotypes and prejudice through unconscious attitudes and project them in their classrooms. For

example, these unconscious biases can impact teaching by causing teachers to treat students differently based on race, ethnicity, language, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, disability, socio-economic background, or other factors.

The outcomes of unconscious anti-Semitic biases within teaching can include:

¹ Discrimination is also a legal concept, understood by the United Nations Human Rights Committee to imply any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference, which is based on any ground such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, and which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing, of all rights and freedoms. (See Human Rights Committee, General Comment 18, Non-discrimination (Thirty-seventh session, 1989), Compilation of General Comments and General Recommendations Adopted by Human Rights Treaty Bodies, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1 at 26 (1994), <https://undocs.org/HRI/GEN/1/Rev.1>.)

- unequal treatment of Jewish colleagues or students;
- inclusion or exclusion of particular information about Jews, Judaism, European, national or local history or culture, the Holocaust or the Middle East;
- reaction, or a lack of reaction, to colleagues or students who

face expressions of prejudice towards Jewish people; and

- tacit support of students who feel empowered to bully Jewish students.

This teaching aid provides information about how unconscious biases function, as well as strategies to identify and

reduce their negative impact on teachers' attitudes and behaviours both inside and outside the classroom. It complements ODIHR's teaching aid no. 3, "Addressing Anti-Semitic Stereotypes and Prejudice", which provides detailed examples of the types of prejudice specifically faced by Jewish people.

Background

At any given moment, there are approximately 11 million pieces of information going into the human brain, but only between 40 and 50 pieces of information are being digested consciously.² In order to manage all this information, our brains select which items to handle consciously or unconsciously. While people may think they are making decisions based on a few pieces of information, they are in fact doing this on the basis of information of which they are conscious. Thousands of other pieces of information influence their decisions unconsciously, creating mental short-cuts that follow instinctual patterns and survival habits that have developed over millions of years. These mental short-cuts are called *cognitive biases* and have been studied for decades by researchers in the fields of social psychology, behavioural economics and cognitive science. So far,

up to 188 different kinds of cognitive bias have been identified, including the following that can have an impact on teaching:

- **Fundamental attribution error** – When we assume that others who behave in a certain way do so because of their character (a fixed trait like ethnicity or gender), rather than in response to environmental circumstances (e.g., having a bad day);
- **Group attribution error** – When the characteristics of an individual group member are generalized to reflect the group as a whole;
- **In-group bias** – When we tend to assign positive characteristics and motivations to people who are similar to us;
- **Confirmation bias** – When we search for, interpret, favour

and recall information in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs or ideas;

- **Bandwagon effect** – When we tend to do (or believe) things because many other people do (or believe) the same;
- **Anchoring effect** – When we tend to rely too heavily, or "anchor", our decision on one trait or piece of information (usually the first piece of information acquired on that subject); and
- **Availability cascade** – When a collective belief gains more and more plausibility through its increasing repetition in public discourse (or "repeat something long enough and it will become true").

Although not all cognitive biases are directly harmful, they can

² Howard Ross, *Exploring Unconscious Bias*, Diversity Best Practices (2008), <<https://culturalawareness.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Unconscious-Bias-White-Paper.pdf>>.

become dangerous when they prevent us from understanding another person's point of view or potential. This is especially relevant to the relationships between teachers and students. People from stigmatized or marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable to the effects of negative bias, which prevents society from maximizing the positive potential of diversity in schools, workplaces and communities.

While some may see a particular bias as favourable (e.g., "Asian students are good at mathematics", "Jews are clever and have a lot of money"), others will not. Biases like these can leave people feeling excluded, unable to fulfil expectations if they do not conform to the stereotype, or even make people belonging to a particular group become targets based on a false generalization.³

Biases and stereotypes in the media – in advertising, news, entertainment and other programmes – have long been a concern, particularly in how they affect the visibility or invisibility of men or women and people of different minority groups. Traditionally, there were two different ways to quantify the bias of a particular news outlet: 1) to analyse the readership of a news outlet; and 2) to analyse the content produced by

a news outlet.⁴ The rise of the internet and social media networks have added a new dimension to this concern due to the ways in which information can target, or be echoed within, specific groups of people.

Biases become a problem when we are unaware of their impact on our own actions or on other people. The accumulated unconscious bias of people in a majority group with greater social, economic or political power can be extremely destructive for others in a society, limiting those in minority groups and harming their well-being.

There is a common perception that teachers – as well as other professionals such as doctors and lawyers – are even-handed and incapable of bias. This perception can cause teachers to overlook or ignore potential biases due to the actual, possible or supposed penalties for holding such biases. This leaves them blind to the ways that biases work at an unconscious level. Educators should engage in self-reflection exercises in order to question and ultimately strengthen their teaching practices and motives. To challenge students and to help them identify internal and external biases, educators need to first experience this process themselves.

Research in the United States has shown that teachers spend up to two-thirds of their time talking to male students and are more likely to interrupt girls and allow boys to talk over them. Teachers also tend to praise and encourage boys more than girls. They spend more time prompting boys to seek deeper answers while rewarding girls for being quiet. Boys are also more frequently called to the front of the class for demonstrations. When teachers ask questions, they direct their gaze towards boys more often, especially when the questions are open-ended.

Until teachers viewed their videotaped interactions, they believed they were being balanced in their exchanges.

SOURCE: Soraya Chemaly, "All Teachers Should Be Trained to Overcome Their Hidden Biases" *Time Magazine*, 12 February 2015, <<http://time.com/3705454/teachers-biases-girls-education/>>. See also: David Sadker and Karen Zittleman, *Still Failing at Fairness: How Gender Bias Cheats Girls and Boys in School and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

³ In January 2006, Ilan Halimi, a French 23-year-old Jewish man was kidnapped and held for ransom by a gang. His attackers targeted him on the false assumption that his family were rich because they were Jewish. Halimi's family were unable to pay the ransom. After weeks of torture, Halimi was found dead on 13 February 2006. The murder was widely recognized as anti-Semitic and the perpetrators were later convicted. See, for example: *The Economist*, "The terrible tale of Ilan Halimi", 2 March 2006, <<https://www.economist.com/europe/2006/03/02/the-terrible-tale-of-ilan-halimi>>.

⁴ Filipe N. Ribeiro et al., "Media Bias Monitor: Quantifying Biases of Social Media News Outlets at Large-Scale", Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence (www.aaai.org), 2018.

Strategies for Recognizing and Reducing Unconscious Bias

One way to become aware of our personal biases is to take the Implicit Bias Test, available online in multiple languages: <<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>>.

Results from this test have shown that even people who are highly conscious of a specific issue (racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc.), and even those belonging to a group targeted by such bias, can hold negative unconscious biases about the group.

Fortunately, there are ways to reduce the effect of biases on personal behaviour. The first and most important step is to recognize that we all have built-in biases that are expressed in different ways. Becoming conscious of our unconscious biases enables us to mitigate their impact on our behaviour.

Once we are aware of our biases, there are several different strategies that can be employed

to reduce their impact on our decisions.

Perspective-taking: When we practice empathy, contemplate others' psychological experiences and try to understand another's perspective and emotions, we are less likely to display automatic expressions of bias. As opposed to trying to be "objective", by taking the time to learn about the lives of students and consider their feelings and

perceptions, we are less likely to fall prey to stereotypical views.⁵

Counter-stereotyping: Being exposed to positive images, stories and role models that counter existing stereotypes has proven to be an effective strategy for decreasing implicit bias.⁶

Consider the opposite: Wanting to be fair and objective alone is not enough to overcome biases in social judgement. A "consider the opposite" strategy has been shown to have a greater corrective effect.⁷

Use your imagination: Mental imagery can have a profound effect on one's emotional and psychological disposition. Researchers have shown that imagination exercises are an effective strategy for helping to internalize counter-stereotypical images.⁸

⁵ A. R. Todd, A. D. Galinsky and G. V. Bodenhausen, "Perspective taking undermines stereotype maintenance processes: Evidence from social memory, behavior explanation, and information solicitation", *Social Cognition*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2012, pp. 94-108.

⁶ Dasgupta and Greenwald. "On the Malleability of Automatic Attitudes: Combating Automatic Prejudice with Images of Admired and Disliked Individuals." In the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 2001. Vol. 81. No.5, pp. 800-814.

⁷ C.G. Lord, E. Preston and M. R. Lepper, "Considering the Opposite: A Corrective Strategy for Social Judgement", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 47, No. 6, 1984, pp. 1231-1243.

⁸ Irene Blair, Jennifer Ma and Alison Lenton, "Imagining Stereotypes Away: The Moderation of Implicit Stereotypes through Mental Imagery", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 5, 2001, pp. 828-841.

Self-linking: Because evaluations of the self are typically positive, and people readily link in-group members to the self, in-group members become imbued with positivity. This strategy asks us to redefine the “we” by conditioning an identity link so that typically out-group members become part of our in-group.⁹

Cultural awareness: Learning about the cultures of the social groups in your community is a useful way to reduce assumptions and misinformation. The popular “colour blind” approach (i.e., avoiding or ignoring racial or ethnic differences) is not an effective strategy to overcome biases, as “colour blindness” actually produces greater implicit bias than strategies that acknowledge difference.¹⁰ Research has shown that developing a greater awareness of and sensitivity towards group and individual differences is more effective in addressing bias.¹¹

“Take a few minutes to imagine what a strong woman is like, why she is considered strong, what she is capable of doing, and what kinds of hobbies and activities she enjoys.”

Source: Irene Blair, Jennifer Ma and Alison Lenton, “Imagining Stereotypes Away: The Moderation of Implicit Stereotypes through Mental Imagery”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 81, No. 5, 2001, pp. 828-841.

Approach behaviours: Well-intentioned individuals can still find themselves uncomfortable or experiencing anxiety in interactions with people who are different. This can lead to avoidance or withdrawal rather than engagement. Researchers have found that we can re-condition ourselves and reduce negative bias through approach behaviours – encouraging ourselves to reach out to others and learning to be comfortable with the uncomfortable.¹²

Blinding: This idea originated in 1952 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and became

common practice at several major symphony orchestras in the United States. It involves placing a screen between auditioning instrumentalists and the judging committee. The practice revealed the major impact of gender bias on the composition of symphony orchestras. As a result of this practice, the proportion of women hired by major symphony orchestras doubled, from 20 per cent to 40 per cent.¹³ Modern televised talent shows sometimes use this strategy. For teachers, blinding may be applied through practices such as hiding students’ names when correcting tests or essays.

⁹ Anna Woodcock and Margo Monteith, “Forging links with the self to combat implicit bias”, *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 16, Issue 4, 2012, pp. 445-461.

¹⁰ E. P. Apfelbaum, S. R. Sommers and M. I. Norton, “Seeing Race and Seeming Racist? Evaluating strategic colorblindness in social interaction”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 95, Issue 4, 2008, pp. 918-932.

¹¹ J. Richeson and R. Nussbaum, “The impact of multiculturalism versus color-blindness on racial bias.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 40, 2004, pp. 417-423.

¹² K. Kawakami et al., “(Close) Distance Makes the Heart Grow Fonder: Improving implicit racial attitudes and interracial interactions through approach behaviours”, *Journal of Personality and Psychology*, Vol. 92, Issue 6, pp. 957-971.

¹³ Claudia Goldin and Cecilia Rouse, “Orchestrating Impartiality: The Impact of ‘Blind’ Auditions on Female Musicians”, *American Economic Review*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 2000, pp. 715-741.

Additional Activities to Uncover, Mitigate and Counter Biases

Teachers can develop awareness of their personal biases, mitigate and counter them by undertaking the following:

What steps can you take to...?

...Uncover your own biases and bring them into conscious awareness?

- Review studies on bias and take online tests that identify personal bias (see *Resources and materials for further reading* for related links).

To uncover your biases towards Jewish people, think about the images and messages you have received about Jews and Judaism in your childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Have they tended to be positive or negative images? Are they limited to particular elements of Jewish history or do you have a broad view of the diversity of Jews and Judaism and their contribution to societies over time?

- Take time to self-reflect, using journal writing or “mindfulness” exercises.
- Collaborate with other educators to observe each other’s teaching and review each other’s curriculum and plans to assist in identifying biases that may be hidden and difficult to detect otherwise.
- Make a list of your positive stereotypes. These can feel less offensive or restrictive, but can also indicate your preferences and, therefore, raise awareness about the things or groups to which you may have a less positive reaction.
- Make a list of job titles, such as taxi driver, banker, street musician, politician, pilot, etc. What associations come to mind when you think about each of these jobs? Which gender or cultural group do you assign to these jobs? Next, make a list of the groups in

society that you have encountered (e.g., Roma, Christians, Jews, Muslims, asylum-seekers, persons with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness). What are the first associations that come to mind for each of these groups?

- Start to notice your tendencies – do you tend to have certain preconceptions about girls and different ones for boys? What messages have you received and transmitted about gender roles? Do you assume that people from certain cultural groups may be better at some activities than others? For example, do you tend to propose scientific activities for students who identify with one group and artistic or physical activities for other groups? Take time to observe your tendencies in how you react to others around you.
- Consider where you usually get your information. Do you always read the same newspaper or discuss the same topics with the same people?

- Make a list of the last three books you read or last three films you saw. Did the authors or main characters represent the same identity group? Do you notice a preference for particular perspectives?

...Overcome or mitigate your biases?

- Identify the gaps in your cultural knowledge and expose yourself to different media to help close those gaps. Consider new perspectives by exploring books, film, music, art and exhibitions that provide insights into other groups' experiences. Becoming familiar with the ways that other groups speak, communicate, celebrate or express their culture can help to reduce any discomfort you feel when interacting with members of these groups.
- Changing your behaviour can have an influence on your thoughts, while being more open will likely influence others' behaviour towards you. As you interact more with

To reduce your reliance on biases in relation to Jewish people, explore the historical and current diversity of Jewish communities in your city, country or region. Read books, watch films, listen to music or attend exhibitions that recount a variety of different Jewish experiences. Visualize what life might have been like had you been born into a vibrant Jewish community. Reach out to a Jewish cultural centre and attend their public events. Identify Jewish role models from a variety of ethnic groups and professions and incorporate their images or reminders of their work into the visuals of your classroom.

new or different people, you will start to have experiences that challenge previously held prejudices and feel more comfortable over time.

- Put yourself in a situation where you are in the minority group. Learn a new language, attend a religious or cultural festival or ask a friend from another cultural group if you can tag along to an event. Observe and listen, try to write down your feelings and thoughts about these experiences, but be careful not to form new generalizations.
- Look in the mirror and think how a person unfamiliar with

you or your situation might generalize about you and why they might make certain assumptions.

- Think about advertisements that you see or hear and try imagining them with entirely different people in the various roles or using different slogans.
- Expose yourself and your students to as many examples of counter-stereotypes as possible. This can be as simple as changing a computer screensaver, but can also be reflected in the images placed around the classroom and the books and stories selected for class work.

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- Role models from a variety of groups also provide opportunities to counter stereotypes. Encourage diverse teams and ensure that you and your students are exposed to a diverse environment, by including, when possible, various topics, locations, colleagues or external speakers who can provide new points of view.

...Counter your own biased reactions?

- Try to analyse the thoughts that you are having and why you might be thinking that way; focus on the associations you have with specific factors, images or words.

- Consider the other person's perspective on a situation, ask questions and practice empathy.
- Try to notice positive characteristics or find something that you have in common with the other person or group.
- Ask yourself the following questions: where did you get the information that is influencing your reaction? What is the aim of this source? How might it be biased? Does the source reinforce anti-Semitic or other stereotypes? What would be another way to consider this situation? Is there somebody you can talk to who

would offer a different or contrary perspective?

- Think about members of groups that you have stereotyped as individuals. Remove the labels and look again. Identify their individual traits and how they differ from the stereotypical expectations.
- Evaluate how you speak to avoid absolutist terms such as "everyone", "always", "they are all..." and broad statements when talking about groups of people. Try to be clear when distinguishing differences between individuals.

Resources and Materials for Further Reading

Take the implicit bias test here:

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

There are several options that test for different biased perceptions, including based on race, gender, weight and sexuality. Each test takes 10-20 minutes and is available in several languages.

The Teaching Channel provides strategies to engage students in discussions at:

<https://www.teachingchannel.org/video/strategies-for-student-centered-discussion>.

For examples and recommendations of how to counter implicit bias, see: the Yale Center for Teaching and Learning, *Awareness of Implicit Biases*

<https://ctl.yale.edu/ImplicitBiasAwareness>.

Jill Suttie, “Four Ways Teachers Can Reduce Implicit Bias,” Greater Good Magazine, Berkeley, 2016

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/four_ways_teachers_can_reduce_implicit_bias.

A lesson plan on implicit bias and race can be downloaded from the Anti-Defamation League website at:

<https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/when-perception-and-reality-collide-implicit-bias-race>.

Some examples of programmes that model counter-stereotyping in schools include:

- Likrat Leadership and Dialogue Project, www.likrat.ch/en/
- Jødiske veivisere (Jewish Pathfinders), www.xn--jdedommen-l8a.no/jodiske-veivisere
- “Rent a Jew” project, <https://rentajew.org>
- Haver Informal Jewish Educational Foundation, <http://haver.hu/english>.

Teaching Tolerance offers online training modules in “Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education”. The modules cover instruction, classroom culture, family and community engagement and teacher leadership, see:

www.tolerance.org/professional-development/critical-practices-for-antibias-education.

The University of California, San Francisco Office of Diversity and Outreach provides videos and research resources for Unconscious Bias Training, covering the science behind unconscious bias and assessing and addressing biases, see:

<https://diversity.ucsf.edu/resources/unconscious-bias>.

