

## Implicit Bias and Course Evaluations

This guide is intended to support students interested in intentionally disrupting implicit bias when completing course evaluations.

**Implicit or unconscious bias** refers to the information, attitudes, and stereotypes that affect how we process information subconsciously. Implicit biases surface when situations trigger mental reactions that influence our behavior. Implicit biases are not related to our conscious intentions, yet they can affect the way we evaluate an individual's performance, form judgments, and evaluate the quality of our experiences and interactions.

### How Can Implicit Bias Affect How I Assess My Courses?

- Biases are more likely to surface when the basis for our judgement is vague or subjective.<sup>1</sup> Biased assessment is also more likely during anonymous surveys, where there is no feedback or accountability for the judgments we make.<sup>2</sup>
- Certain emotional states (anger, fatigue, stress, multitasking) can cause **expedience bias**, the tendency to make stereotyped judgments of stigmatized group members, even if the source of the emotion has nothing to do with the current situation.<sup>3</sup>

*Ex.: A sheriff's deputy a young black female law student to step out of a line of attorneys waiting to enter the courtroom and asks her whether she is the defendant in the case.*

- **Similarity Bias** occurs when we use character to explain negative behavior from members of our "Out Group", and use situational factors to explain the same behavior from a member of our "In Group".<sup>4</sup>

*Ex.: When a peer of a different race or gender misses a deadline it seems to be because they are "lazy" or not working hard enough. However, when a peer of our own race or gender misses a deadline, it seems to be because they are "over-tasked" or having a bad day.*

- **Cognitive Bias** occurs when a small number of good or bad traits leads a reviewer to assume that all of an actor's traits are correspondingly good or bad.

*Ex.: A new law associate of color initially struggled to meet performance expectations after replacing an associate with more experience. Even after a year in the job, the associate of color is still given hyper-critical feedback when adequately delivering basic content.*

- **Recency or Distance Bias** is the tendency to place too much emphasis on experiences that are freshest in your memory.<sup>4</sup>

*Ex.: When a jury hears the final lawyer's closing argument before being dismissed to deliberate and fixates on the lawyer's arguments more so than the other evidence presented during the trial.*

## How Can I Disrupt Implicit Bias When Completing Course Evaluations?

Here are five research-based strategies that may help mitigate the influence of implicit bias on decisions and actions:

1. **Acknowledge the risk of bias clouding assessment.** Awareness of implicit bias alone is not enough to disrupt its impact, however, when decision makers become conscious of the potential for prejudice, they often attempt to correct for it.<sup>5</sup>
2. **Reflect before making your assessment.** Clear your mind and focus on the task at hand. Individuals interested in minimizing the impact of implicit bias on their judgments should actively engage in thoughtful, deliberative information processing before evaluating another's performance.<sup>7</sup>
3. **Look for Similarities.** Humans tend to judge those whom they perceive as different for harshly. Find something you have in common with the person you are evaluating before giving feedback or making your assessment.<sup>4</sup>
4. **Be Specific.** Detail what a person said or did using descriptive words (rather than judgement words) as evidence in making your assessment. Focusing on specific information makes the individual more salient in your assessment than the person's social category (e.g., race or gender).<sup>6</sup>
5. **State your reasoning before expressing your opinion.** Describing how you formed your conclusion before stating your position creates an opportunity for self-critique.<sup>7</sup>

### Endnotes:

- 1 Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2000). Aversive Racism and Selection Decisions: 1989 and 1999. *Psychological Science*, 11(4), 315–319. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00262>
- 2 Leikes, Y., Krosnick, J.A., Marx, D. M., Judd, C. M., and Park, B. (2012). Complete Anonymity Comprises the Accuracy of Self-Reports. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(6), 1291-1299. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2012.07.002>
- 3 DeSteno, D., Dasgupta, N., Bartlett, M. Y., & Cajdric, A. (2004). Prejudice From Thin Air: The Effect of Emotion on Automatic Intergroup Attitudes. *Psychological Science*, 15(5), 319–324. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0956-7976.2004.00676.x>
- 4 Jones, B., Smith, K., and Rock, D. (2018). Three Biases that Hijack Performance Reviews, and How to Address Them. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2018/06/3-biases-that-hijack-performance-reviews-and-how-to-address-them>
- 5 Green AR, Carney DR, Pallin DJ, Ngo LH, Raymond KL, Iezzoni LI, et al. Implicit bias among physicians and its prediction of thrombolysis decisions for black and white patients. *J Gen Intern Med*. 2007;22(9):1231–8. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-007-0258-5>
- 6 Lebrecht S, Pierce LJ, Tarr MJ, Tanaka JW. Perceptual other-race training reduces implicit racial bias. *PLoS One*. 2009;4(1):e4215. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0004215>
- 7 Casey, P. M. (2012). Helping Courts Address Implicit Bias: Resources for Education. National Center for State Courts. <http://ncsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/accessfair/id/246>