

# I Am Prejudiced, and So Are You

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I teach and research causes of prejudice. When people hear the term “prejudice,” they typically think of what we call old-fashioned or blatant prejudice. Members of the Ku Klux Klan (K.K.K.) are openly and consciously prejudiced. While this type of prejudice still exists, there is a more subtle version that we all share. We all share it because we live in a world where prejudice is real and stereotype formation is fundamentally part of our cognitive architecture. To make matters worse, the cognitive architecture that results in this type of prejudice operates outside of consciousness. In other words, you are unaware of when and how it influences your behavior. This more insidious form of prejudice is known as implicit bias.

Implicit bias was mentioned in both the 2016 presidential and vice-presidential debates. Understanding the psychological research behind terms like “prejudice” and “implicit bias” is important for citizenship. With claims of implicit bias in the police, academia, and the business world, we have a societal obligation to understand the relevant perspective offered by behavioral science. Let us look at some popular examples of these terms first.

During the vice-presidential debate, Mike Pence referenced implicit bias. Pence said, “The bad mouthing that comes from people that seize upon tragedy in the wake of police action shootings as a reason to use a broad brush to accuse law enforcement of implicit bias or institutional racism . . . that really has got to stop.” Pence continued:

I mean, when an African-American police officer in Charlotte named Brentley Vinson, an all-star football player who went to Liberty University here in the state, came home, followed his dad into law enforcement, joined the force in Charlotte in 2014, was involved in a police action shooting that claimed the life of Keith Lamont Scott, it was a tragedy. I mean, we mourn with those who mourn. We grieve with those who grieve. And we’re saddened at the loss of life. But Hillary Clinton actually referred to that moment as an example of implicit bias in the police force.

The claim that Pence is making here is that an African-American police officer is not capable of bias against African-American citizens, or that racism must cross race lines.<sup>2</sup>

During the Presidential debate, Hillary Clinton stated the following:

I think implicit bias is a problem for everyone, not just for police. Unfortunately too many of us in our great country jump to conclusions about each other. Therefore, I think we need, all of us, to be asking hard questions about why we are feeling this way. When it comes to policing, since it can

have, literally, fatal consequences, I have said in my first budget, we would put money into that budget to help us deal with implicit bias.

Research indicates that police are more likely to stop and search black men than white men and are more likely to use lethal force against black men.<sup>3</sup> Is this racial difference the result of implicit bias? The claim that the police suffer from implicit bias is offensive to some. People often assume that implicit bias and traditional racism are the same thing. They are not. We need to unpack these terms to understand how they are different. The differences matter.

## WHAT IS PREJUDICE?

An early psychological definition of prejudice was offered by Gordon Allport.<sup>4</sup> Allport argued that prejudice is an irrational negative evaluation of a group or an individual because of their group membership. According to Allport, prejudice was not based in reality. That is the classic definition, but one that most modern psychologists do not use.

Is prejudice necessarily negative and irrational as argued by Allport? Imagine aliens from outer space land on earth. They are purple and every alien I come across tries to kill me. Now I develop some negative feelings towards these purple aliens. Is that bad? Am I wrong or irrational? I do not think so. I will admit that I have negative feelings for white supremacists, members of the K.K.K., neo-Nazis, and the alt-right because of their chosen group membership. By definition, that makes me prejudiced. Similarly, psychologists have acknowledged that some prejudices might actually be justified. That is not to suggest that all prejudices are justified, but rather to suggest that prejudice is not by definition unjustified or irrational. Prejudice is simply a negative evaluation based on group membership.

Prejudice is based on group membership but group membership is flexible. The flexibility of group membership means that we can talk about all kinds of different prejudices, and the literature does. It talks about xenophobia, racism, sexism, and the targeting of specific religious and political beliefs. For the purposes of this talk, I am going to mostly use examples related to racism and sexism.

How do you know if someone's behavior is prejudiced? A lot of what we see in the news, in terms of particular incidents related to police use of force, is full of perceptual and contextual ambiguity. There is a moment that is captured on film, often not very well, and while some people may read it as clearly an abuse of force, others do not.

When it comes to any particular incident, as a behavioral scientist, it is hard for me to say that a specific event clearly is or is not an act of prejudice. Rather than specific events, social scientists tend to look at statistical data at an aggregate level. When examining patterns across many specific events, it becomes much easier to say that there is clear evidence that we do have problems with excessive police force and bias directed against African-American males.

While there are models of prejudice that are specific to certain kinds of prejudice (e.g., racism or sexism), it is more useful to consider a general model of prejudice. The Justification-Suppression Model (JSM) of prejudice was developed to help explain prejudice in its many forms.<sup>5</sup>

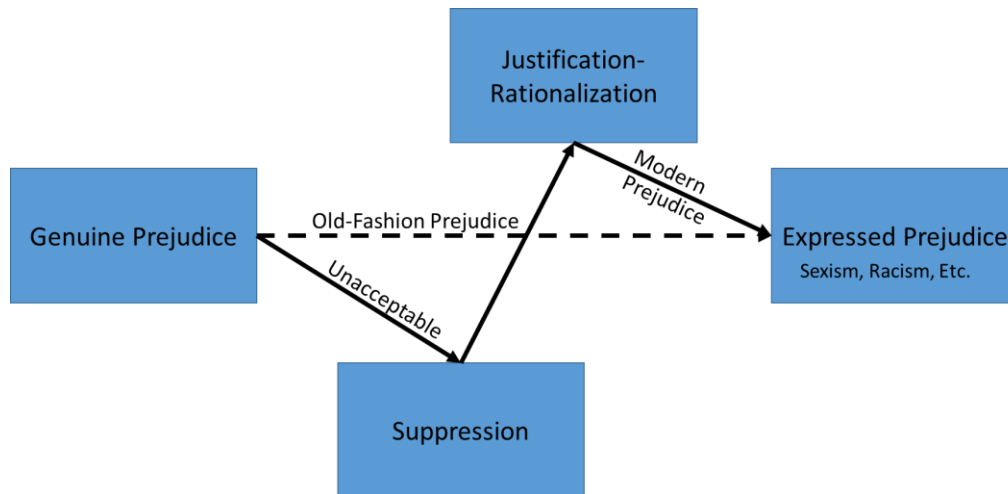


Figure 1: An adapted visual summarizing the Justification-Suppression Model of Prejudice.

We are going to address all four of the boxes shown in the Justification-Suppression Model of Prejudice.

### Genuine Prejudice

First, where does “genuine prejudice” come from? Like a lot of things in psychology, the nature versus nurture question is a good place to start. Is prejudice something we are naturally wired for or something that we learn? I am going to suggest, as others have, that there are natural mechanisms that might encourage us to be prejudiced. That is, we might be biologically predisposed to learn prejudices.

The context of human evolution consisted of humans travelling in small bands of hunter-gatherers. Coming into contact with a group of people who looked and behaved differently than you could have been dangerous for a number of reasons: they may be overtly dangerous, threatening in some physical way; even if they were not physically dangerous, they likely carried diseases that you have not been exposed to, and that makes them dangerous. When Europeans came to the Americas, there was a massive influx of disease that the Native Americans had never been exposed to, and it decimated their population. Some amount of fear, people argue, might be something that was evolutionarily advantageous. I am not suggesting that is good, but rather that fear of difference might be part of our humanity.

More important is the idea that categorization is something that is automatic and fundamentally human. We categorize things all of the time. Imagine that you have never been to Juniata. When you walk into a room, you can look at a chair that you have never seen before and instantly categorize it as a chair.

You do not look at it and wonder with confusion what the object is. This is because we regularly and automatically categorize things in our environment. This categorization process is based on stereotypes.

A stereotype, from a cognitive perspective, is an abstract mental representation that is stored in memory. We have an abstract mental representation of a chair, and because of that I can walk into a room, see a chair, and know what to do with it. That is useful and helpful in our daily lives. Broadly speaking, when cognitive psychologists talk about stereotypes, they are seen as useful and generally good things. We call them prototypes to differentiate them from the negative connotations that come with the term “stereotype.” However, they are fundamentally the same thing. The “representativeness heuristic” is a term used for our tendency to categorize new objects in the world based on how they match with a stereotype stored in memory.<sup>6</sup> This categorization then guides behavior.

What stereotypes you learn depends on the experiences you have. Associative learning is what happens when two things frequently occur together. These associations can be very basic and are very easy to learn. For example, you could go into the local kindergarten class and ask the children, “Is Hillary Clinton good or bad?” They will know. They will not know anything about Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, except that they are good or bad. They have already formed a very basic emotional association with a particular person and a particular party, based on their family experiences.

We also form associations through media exposure (i.e., music, film, news, and the Internet). Analysis of media portrayals show that black males are often represented as threatening, whereas white males are represented as leaders and heroes. Observing media portrayals will also make it clear that Muslims are frequently represented as terrorists. Even though the vast majority of Muslims in the world are peaceful, that is not what you see on the television. When the terms “Muslim” or “Islam” are mentioned, it is usually related to terrorism and violence. This pairing sets up a clear association in memory, a fearful association. Even if you are explicitly against being prejudiced, you cannot help but form associations based on the world around you.

For example, imagine that every time I drifted towards this podium, you received an electric shock. It would not take long before my close proximity to the podium would cause your respiration and heart rate to go up, and your sweat glands to trigger. This physiological detection of a threat (the shock) would happen before you were conscious of the association. This means that you learn biases that you are not consciously aware of.

The same thing happens when you are exposed to threatening images over and over again. Without being conscious of it, you are going to form associations that bias your thinking. For example, Congress is 80% male, 80% white, and 92% Christian. This empirical fact will inform your stereotype of a politician. Because of this empirical fact, we would expect your stereotype of a political leader in the United States to be a white, Christian male simply because that is who happens to be there.

Imagine again that aliens from outer space land on earth and are shown images of all past United States Presidents (before Barack Obama), in addition to photos Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Donald Trump. Now imagine that we ask the aliens to identify which one of these last three photos looks most presidential. Based on simple associative learning, they are going to pick Trump simply because Trump is the only white male. Empirically speaking, Trump does look more presidential because we have never had, until Obama, a black president, and we still have not had a female president. When Trump said that Hillary does not look presidential, at a fundamental level, he was correct. I am not saying this is good, but it is accurate. By claiming that Clinton does not look presidential, Trump is activating people's presidential stereotypes. These stereotypes have been informed by years of basic associations.

If you use Google Images and search "Muslims," you will find a lot of angry faces. My recent search of "Muslims" produced images with blood, knives, and violence. A search of "Islam" will generate similar images. In contrast, a search of "Mexicans" will result in images of parties, but also violence, guns, and mug shots. Interestingly, Trump showed up near the top in all three of these searches. These images are just examples of what "typical" features the media associate with these groups. These images inform our stereotypes at an unconscious level.

To summarize, genuine prejudices are learned through unconscious associations formed through exposure to our environment. They are often learned at a very young age and reflect how those around us (our family and the media) see different groups.

### Suppression

According to the Justification-Suppression Model of prejudice, we tend to suppress genuine prejudice. Why do we suppress it? My grandfather was quite comfortable and open with expressing certain sexist and racist ideas. He grew up in a time where such ideas were widely accepted. As he aged, he increasingly found himself in a society that no longer accepted these views. That is one reason we suppress prejudice: society changes. Another reason we suppress our prejudices is self-presentation concerns. You may have prejudiced feelings, but you know that many others do not accept them. You may also suppress prejudiced feelings because you do not want to view yourself that way. The Justification-Suppression Model of prejudice argues that we all have some genuine prejudices, but we often suppress them for the reasons described above.

### Rationalization

The Justification-Suppression Model also indicates that people have a tendency to rationalize their genuine prejudice. Remember, genuine prejudice is often formed at a young age and may be more emotional than rational. In order to make it seem acceptable, we need rationalizations. You will often hear

these rationalization following something like, “Well, I’m not sexist, but . . .” What follows is the rationalization. The rationalization is an attempt to justify their prejudice. Today, we can often hear justifications for prejudice against Muslims. Because Muslims are viewed as threatening, it has become socially acceptable to express prejudice against them. My own research shows that perceptions of Muslims as threatening are used to justify support for anti-Muslim policies.<sup>7</sup>

### Expressed Prejudice

Expressed prejudice is a result of genuine prejudice, our tendency to suppress it, and our use of rationalization. Social norms act as powerful forces to suppress prejudice. Although many people are racist, American social norms have often placed pressure on people to suppress their racism. In a clever study, Crandall and White asked people immediately before and after the election of Trump how socially acceptable they believed others thought it was to express prejudiced views. Regardless of whom they voted for, people perceived a shift in the social norm. Compared to their responses just before the election, their responses after the election showed that they estimated the acceptance of expressed prejudice to be higher in society.<sup>8</sup> White supremacist rallies like the “Unite the Right” rally on August 12, 2017 in Charlottesville VA are to be expected when a leader fans racist ideas.

Trump’s election was seen by many in the white supremacist movement as a victory. Trump’s installment of Stephen Bannon as chief strategist was widely viewed as a sign that the alt-right, a modern white supremacist movement, now had a voice in White House policy. For those who previously suppressed their genuine prejudice, they may now view Trump’s victory as a sign that open prejudice is acceptable. Indeed, this was the message delivered by David Duke, former K.K.K. leader, at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA. Speaking about the rally, Duke stated, “This represents a turning point for the people of this country. We are determined to take our country back, we’re going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump, and that’s what we believed in, that’s why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he’s going to take our country back and that’s what we gotta do.”<sup>9</sup> Pictures of this “Unite the Right” event depict a large variety of overtly racist symbols such as Nazi flags and K.K.K. attire.

Social scientists have seen a steady long-term decline in overt forms of classic prejudice. It is too early to know if Trump’s election will cause a large shift in the public’s acceptance of expressed prejudice.

### HOW DO WE MEASURE PREJUDICE?

The old-fashioned prejudice is easy to measure. Old-fashioned prejudice (also known as classic prejudice) is blatant. For example, the belief that men are smarter than women was once widely accepted. You could simply ask people if they believed it to be true and they would openly agree. Most people do

not express old-fashioned prejudices anymore because of the way society has changed. Yet we still see a lot of statistical evidence that racism and sexism are still occurring. How do we measure it if we cannot ask in blatant ways?

This is where measures of modern and symbolic prejudice come from. These measures attempt to ask about prejudice in more subtle ways. For example, they often include a statement that sex or race discrimination no longer exists. Because of the wealth of information we have that sexism and racism still exist, their denial is viewed as a sign of prejudice itself.

One of the more popular measures of implicit bias today is the implicit association test. The implicit association test asks participants to categorize two things at once. You may be shown a picture of a male or female face. If it is a male face, you hit the button on the right, and if it is a female face you hit the button on the left. At the same time, you are asked to categorize words related to a professional activity on the right and a home activity on the left. If cooking appears, you would click left and then a woman appears and you also click left. It is much easier to remain stereotype-consistent (mapping female and home activities to the same side) than stereotype-inconsistent (mapping male and home activities to the same side) when doing this task. Reaction times are used as a measure of association in memory. If it is harder for you to match professional words with female faces than male faces, that is an example of an association bias in memory. It is not correlated with explicit measures of prejudice, but it is correlated with behaviors that are prejudiced. Take the [implicit association test](#) yourself.

## HOW DOES IMPLICIT BIAS RELATE TO INSTITUTIONAL BIAS?

Because implicit bias is unconscious, it is possible to have an organization where no one person is explicitly racist, yet the institution acts in ways that systematically penalizes certain groups based on race. The idea that the police might have a problem with implicit bias and institutional bias, even if no one in police force is explicitly racist, is theoretically possible. This is the issue that was raised in both the presidential and vice-presidential debates.

To give you some examples of this, let us look at a few studies. The first study took made-up résumés and sent them out for job applications. They had identical résumés and qualifications; the only difference was that some résumés had a stereotypically black name while some had a stereotypically white name. White names needed to send ten résumés to get one callback. African-American names needed to send about fifteen résumés to get one callback.<sup>10</sup> While it is possible that some of the people who looked at these résumés were explicitly racist, I think the difference in callback ratios is more likely the result of implicit bias.

Other studies have shown that whites and blacks use marijuana at roughly the same rates in society. However, we know that blacks are penalized for this use much more than whites. The conviction

rates are higher for blacks, even though the usage rates are the same.<sup>11</sup> If we look at the conviction rates, we then see that the sentencing is harsher for blacks than whites. So not only is there a bias at the conviction level, there is another bias on top of that at the sentencing level.

If you are high in implicit racism and we ask you to write about some fearful event in life, and then later on ask how much you support voter ID laws, your support for voter ID laws goes up. If you are low on implicit racism, writing about fearful events has no effect on your support for voter ID laws.<sup>12</sup>

We also know that subliminal exposure, below the level of consciousness, to black male faces causes an increase in amygdala activation. The amygdala is the part of the brain that lights up when you detect a threat.<sup>13</sup>

There is also evidence that implicit bias influences instructor evaluations. Researchers claim that “In two very different universities and in a broad range of course topics, [student evaluations of teachers] measure students’ gender biases better than they measure the instructor’s teaching effectiveness.”<sup>14</sup>

Implicit biases affect powerful women through what is known as the double bind. These women are either seen as likable but incompetent, or competent but cold. Competent but cold is how Hillary Clinton is often described. People just do not like her. They think she is intelligent, but cold. When you explore gender stereotypes, terms that are commonly associated with women are “relational,” “dainty,” “petite,” “understanding,” and “kind,” whereas terms commonly associated with men are “ambitious,” “leader,” “competitive,” and “confident.” If you ask people what traits they are looking for in a good leader, they are going to list things that generally fall into the male category. When a man speaks up he is often viewed as confident but this same behavior by a woman will be labeled “bossy.” This is implicit bias: the degree to which a certain person fits within the stereotype or not.

In summary, the effects of implicit bias are pervasive. Our cognitive system is fundamentally designed to create and use stereotypes. While this works well for objects, it is the cause of implicit bias when applied to people. Our lived experiences, including media exposure, shape our stereotypes and our implicit biases. The expression of prejudice is shaped by the perception of social norms. When people think it is acceptable to express prejudice, they are much more likely to do so. Awareness of how these biases shape our behavior is only the first step. With this awareness, we can consider ways to minimize their unjust effects.

## NOTES

1. This text expands on the original presentation by referencing events that have occurred since October 2016.



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  12. Antoine J. Banks and Heather M. Hicks, "Fear and Implicit Racism: Whites' Support for Voter ID Laws," *Political Psychology*, 37 (2016): 641-658.
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