Unraveling BIAS in the Brain

KNOW YOUR BRAIN

The brain supports the learning, experience, and expression of prejudice, and the storage, activation, and behavioral expression of social stereotypes. These are the neural mechanisms of social cognition that underlie forms of bias. So, if you have a brain, you hold prejudice, bias, and stereotypes. Recognization of this truth can help diminish some of the discomforts that come with the realization that we all have these things. The good news is that networks in the brain also support the self-regulation of cognitive control, which can reduce the expression of prejudice and stereotypes.

EXAMINE YOUR FEAR CONDITIONING

Fear conditioning is a mechanism underlying implicit prejudice. It is a learned threat response (Emotional, behavioral, and physiological) to outgroups or people who are different than you. In what circumstances do you experience behavioral freezing, anxiety, and heightened vigilance? Can you rationalize this fear conditioning based on your own experiences?

PRACTICE EMPATHY TO DRIVE CONNECTION

It can be easy to jump to conclusions about people. Because of how our brain works, we are prone to assign stereotypes attributing the causality of events. Most of the time, we don't know the whole story. When you find yourself doing this, ask yourself, "What else might be true?" Try to think of five different explanations rather than the immediate one likely based on prejudice, stereotypes, and bias. When possible, ask and don't assume. This practice can help you to understand others, or in the least, not assume the worst. Empathy is a skill that can bring people together and make people feel included.

WATCH, READ, AND LEARN

To increase empathy and to expand our world-view, we must learn more about other people, cultures, and ways of knowing and doing. Watch films, read books, and attend talks that will help you expand your knowledge of others.

STOP DEHUMANIZING OTHERS

Dehumanization starts with language and can lead us to place stigmatized groups placed outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply. We must consider how stereotypes, prejudice, and bias affects how we see and engage with others. Examine how you've perhaps unintentionally stopped seeing groups of humans as humans.

CHANGE YOUR LENS

If mentalizing is the process of considering a person's unique perspective and motives, how could your lens affect your assessment of others? Does a narrow world view cloud your lens? Is your lens out of focus to the humanity of others? Is your lens one of empathy and kindness? Evaluate the state of your lens and make a plan to adjust it accordingly.

ACTIVELY CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES

Stereotypes reinforce the marginalization and oppression of others. We must actively challenge stereotypes, dispel myths, and provide more authentic stories of individuals.

IDENTIFY YOUR IMPLICIT BIASES

You can take implicit association tests to help you identify your unconscious biases (implicit.harvard.edu). The control of implicit bias requires the detection of a conflict between a biased tendency and one's goal to act without bias. So, first, you must decide that you don't want to be biased, then increase awareness of how prejudice and stereotypes manifest in your interactions with others, and finally, take action to change this behavior.

SILENCE IS COMPLICITY

By not saying anything, by not standing up for those who are marginalized and oppressed, we become complicit in their oppression.

If we use our brains to understand and combat bias, we can create a more inclusive and just world.

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