

Susan T. Fiske

*on prejudice &
the brain*

“They are bigots;
you are, maybe, a little biased sometimes;
I, of course, am accurate.”

[how to conjugate an adjective across
three persons]

Most people think they are less biased than average. Just as we can't all be better than average, though, we also cannot all be less prejudiced than average. What's more likely: all of us harbor more biases than we think we do. Social neuroscience suggests that most of us don't even know the half of it. A

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twenty-year eruption of research reveals exactly how automatically and unconsciously prejudices operate. As members of a society with egalitarian ideals, most Americans have good intentions, but our brains and our impulses all too often betray us. That's the bad news from the 'decade of the brain.'

But the good news, from the current 'decade of behavior,' provides solutions. Individual values and organizational commitment can override our worst impulses. Getting information, however, is the necessary first step, and we now know a lot about bias, both blatant and subtle, with the aid of the social sciences and neurosciences.

The first thing to understand: modern prejudice is not your grandparents' prejudice. Old-fashioned racism and sexism were known quantities because people would mostly say what they thought. Blacks were lazy; Jews were sly; women were either dumb or bitchy. Modern equivalents continue, of course. Look at current images of immigrants. But most estimates place such blatant and empirically wrongheaded bigotry at only 10 percent of citizens in modern democracies. Blatant bias does spawn hate crimes, but these are fortunately rare (though not rare enough). At the least, we can identify the barefaced bigots.

Our own prejudice – and our children's and grandchildren's prejudice, if we don't address it – takes a more subtle, unexamined form. People can identify another person's apparent race, gender, and age in a matter of milliseconds. In this blink of an eye, a complex network of stereotypes, emotional prejudices, and behavioral impulses activates. Why? Because the culture puts them in our brains. That's how they become so widespread and automatic. These knee-jerk reactions do not require conscious bigotry, though they are worsened by it.

How do we know this happens? In our own lab, for example, we dug up dozens of images of societal groups who were identifiable in an instant: people with disabilities, older people, homeless people, drug addicts, rich businessmen, and American Olympic athletes. Our research participants agreed that they evoked the respective pity, disgust, envy, and pride predicted by our theory. We then slid a different group of participants into the fMRI scanner to observe their brains' responses to these evocative photos. Within a moment of observing the photograph of an apparently homeless man, people's brains set off a sequence of reactions characteristic of disgust and avoidance. For neuroscience wonks, the activated areas included the insula, which is reliably implicated in disgust toward nonhuman objects such as garbage, mutilation, and human waste. Notably, the homeless people's photographs also *failed* to activate other areas of the brain that are reliably involved whenever people think about other people or themselves (dorsomedial prefrontal cortex). In the case of the homeless (and drug addicts), these areas simply failed to light up, as if people had stumbled on a pile of garbage.

We were surprised, not by the distinct disgust but by how easy it was to achieve. These were photographs, after all, not smelly, noisy, intrusive people. Other researchers have seen that even dull yearbook photographs of black or white young men can trigger the brain's amygdala; these emotion-alert areas activate in many whites to pictures of unfamiliar black male faces, as if they are prepared for fear in particular.

Even outside of social neuroscience, social psychologists have documented people's instant unfortunate associations to out-groups – those groups not

their own. Whether they differ on age, ethnicity, religion, or political party, people favor their own groups over others, and they do so automatically. We have always had codes: PLU (people like us), NOKD (not our kind, dear), the 'hood, the man. Every culture names the 'us' and the 'not-us.' This much appears to be human nature.

This all-too-human comfort with the familiar and similar is probably hard-wired through people's affinity for their in-groups. In order to survive and thrive, people need to belong with accepting others. Attachment matters. Babies do not do well when only their physical needs are met; adults' cardiovascular and immune systems fail when they are isolated; mortality tracks social connectedness. Historically as well as currently, we are motivated to belong with others, to understand things as they do, to feel in control of our social encounters, to feel social esteem, and to be able to trust those nearest us. All this is easier when other people resemble you.

To survive in the rest of the world, people demand, like the sentry at night: 'Who goes there? Friend or foe?' People need to know right away who is on their side and who means them harm. According to our research, people's minds set up simple algorithms: If competitor for scarce resources, then not-friend. Thus, not nice, not warm, not trustworthy. If in-group or ally, then friend, and presumably warm and trustworthy.

Status also has immediate significance for social survival. After 'friend or foe,' one needs to know the other's rank. Status implies competence and the ability to enact intentions for good or ill. If high-status, then competent – one had best pay attention to this person. If low-status, one can ignore the incompetent other without much cost.

The friend-foe, able-unable judgments yield four kinds of people in the world – not the proverbial two. Able friends are people like us (middle class), are our cultural ideals (Olympic athletes, astronauts), and are our close allies (for Americans, the British and the Canadians). In most instances, these are our in-groups; we feel pride and admiration. Even people who are not themselves middle class, for example, typically identify with middle-class ideals.

The Others come in three kinds. Two of them provoke intense ambivalence and, with it, mixed messages. We pity those cooperators who cannot enact their intentions – those seemingly too disabled, deficient, or decrepit (remember, we are dealing in stereotypes here). Pity is a mixed emotion. Pity communicates paternalistic, top-down aid, coupled with neglect. This is the likable but disrespected quadrant of societal space.

Conversely, in the respected but disliked quadrant dwell those at least as fortunate as ourselves: high-status competitors. Grudgingly viewed as competent, but resented as neither warm nor trustworthy, they elicit envy, again a mixed emotion. Envy says, “The other has something that I wish I had, and I will take it away if I can.” Respect combined with dislike is a volatile mix. It predicts going-along-to-get-along, but also attacking and fighting when the chips are down. Envy is directed at high-status people not like oneself: rich people all over the world and, in the United States at this time, Asian and Jewish people. Also, no doubt, members of the American Academy.

The fourth quadrant is unequivocally bad: both disliked and disrespected. Low-status others who try to compete (but fail), exploitative parasites – they are stereotyped as neither nice nor smart. They elicit, more than any other

category, both disgust and contempt. They are alternately neglected and attacked. And these are the people whose photographs lit up the insula and failed to light up the social areas of the brain.

People have a tendency to think that biology is destiny. But just because we can correlate impulses in the brain with certain prejudices does not mean we are hardwired to hate drug addicts and homeless people. In the racial neuroscience studies, for instance, amygdala (emotion-related) reactions correspond to other indicators of prejudice. So people who are more prejudiced by other measures show more amygdala response. But the levels of response vary by individual. And the alarms in whites’ amygdalas do not go off to *familiar* black faces. Likewise, they grow accustomed to faces with repeated exposure. So prejudiced responses vary a lot, depending on the interplay between perceiver and target.

The most important lessons of the latest biologically inspired social research point to the complexity of the interactions between biology and the environment. Take the amygdala-race results. We find that they evaporate as soon as people consider what vegetable the pictured person might like for lunch. Similarly, our latest data indicate that the dehumanization of homeless people and drug addicts can be altered by the same task, guessing what they would like to eat, as if one were running a soup kitchen. A long line of our previous research indicates that putting people on the same team helps to overcome prejudices over time.

The environment can interact with human nature for good or ill. People put under stress, provocation, peer pressure, or authority sanction will enact their prejudices in the worst ways. We

have seen this in hate crimes directed at homeless people, homosexuals, and all ethnicities; and we have argued that these processes underlie prisoner abuse in settings such as Abu Ghraib.

Learning to deal with difference is hard. Generating enthusiasm for differences is even harder. Yet our message is essentially optimistic. If we recognize prejudice's subtle yet inexorable pressures, we can learn to moderate even unconscious prejudice. People will always gravitate toward the familiar and similar, but they can expand their boundaries, if sufficiently motivated. And this is the substance of social science married to neuroscience.