# The Origins of Implicit Bias – and How It Can Be Overcome

In this *New York Times* article, Daniel Yudkin and Jay Van Bavel (New York University) note that “implicit bias” was a hot topic in the U.S. presidential campaign. In one of the debates, Hillary Clinton said it was a problem for everyone, not just police officers. Mike Pence responded that this was a smear, suggesting that all Americans are racists. But recent research indicates that the presence of unconscious biases doesn’t mean someone is bigoted. Rather, say Yudkin and Van Bavel, implicit bias “is grounded in a basic human tendency to divide the social world into groups… to think in terms of ‘us versus them’… This doesn’t make the effects of implicit bias any less worrisome but it does mean people should be less defensive about it.”

In one experiment, volunteers played a game with monetary stakes and saw a player stealing money from another participant. Those who witnessed the theft were given the opportunity to punish the perpetrator by taking some or all of his or her money and removing it from the game. The researchers found that if people believed the thief was a fan of their football team, they confiscated less money than if they believed the thief supported a rival team. The same was true if they believed the thief was a citizen of their own country versus being a foreigner.

Interestingly, behavior that was biased in one direction or the other occurred only if people had to make their decision quickly – in a few seconds or less – or if they were distracted by another cognitively demanding task – for example, being asked to retain a string of seven letters and numbers in memory. If, on the other hand, they were given time to reflect on their decision – to engage in rational deliberation – they showed little or no bias toward those who favored a rival football team or were citizens of a foreign country.

Why do humans have an instinctive, gut-level bias toward their in-group and against a perceived out-group? “*Homo sapiens* spent thousands of years in close-knit communities competing for scarce resources on the African savanna,” say Yudkin and Van Bavel. “Members of the in-group were presumably sources of help, comfort, and cooperation; members of opposing groups, by contrast, were sources of threat and violence. As a result, the tendency to instinctively treat in-group members with care and foreigners with caution may be etched into our DNA.” This can carry over to racial groups, since people often live with others of their own race and form some degree of group identity. This tendency is certainly heightened if there’s racial stereotyping and institutional discrimination going on.

However, conclude Yudkin and Van Bavel, “We need not resign ourselves to a future of tribalism. On the contrary, our research suggests that people have the capacity to override their worst instincts – if they are able to reflect on their decision-making as opposed to acting on their first impulse… Acknowledging the truth about ourselves – that we see and think about the world through the lens of group affiliations – is the first step to making things better.”

“The Roots of Implicit Bias” by Daniel Yudkin and Jay Van Bavel in *The New York Times*, December 11, 2016, <http://nyti.ms/2hksUMd>