



Unconscious bias: Research helps break down barriers

STACEY SINCLAIR WAS AWARE OF INEQUALITY AT A YOUNG AGE. "On some level I was always interested in injustice," said Sinclair, an associate professor of psychology and African American studies. "As a 7-year-old, I wanted to be the first black female to do everything."

Today, Sinclair uses the tools of science to peel back the human psyche in search of the causes of racial inequality. In a recent study, she and Drew Jacoby-Senghor, who earned his doctorate in 2014, explored how implicit prejudices affected people's interactions. Since people tend to group together based on shared characteristics, Sinclair and Jacoby-Senghor wondered if people with the same levels of implicit prejudice — also called unconscious bias — end up in the same circles.

The researchers found that whites with stronger implicit anti-black bias were less motivated to affiliate with whites who have black friends than with whites who have white friends. In other words, people likely to have similar levels of implicit prejudice gravitated toward each other, even if they weren't consciously aware of it. The study was published in the September 2015 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

For the study, the researchers recruited white participants via an online platform and showed them pairs of faces, one white and the other either white or black. In each case, subjects were asked to rate the friendliness of the white face by answering questions such as, "To what extent do you think you would want to become friends with this person?" Additionally, the subjects'

perceived similarity between themselves and the person on the screen was measured by asking how strongly they agreed with statements such as, "This person and I probably see things in much the same way."

Sinclair and her collaborators found that white participants with higher implicit bias exhibited higher perceived similarity to the white faces paired with a white friend. This perceived similarity in turn was related to a stronger desire for friendship.

Sinclair's previous research shows that people adjust their implicit-prejudice level to match the views of the people with whom they interact, a principle called social tuning. This research, which Sinclair outlined in a 2014 review article in the journal *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, suggests that egalitarian views can be catching.

Sinclair offers some practical advice based on her research. To make use of social tuning, she advises: "Literally wear your egalitarianism on your sleeve. In policy, what this means is make it clear that this is an environment that truly appreciates diversity, that equality is a value that the individuals in this environment hold. Our research suggests that people's attitudes will change to be in line with these values relatively effortlessly on their part."

In awareness of their tendency to seek similarity, Sinclair suggests that people step out of their comfort zone. "When you're networking, or when you're at a party, and you're deciding who to walk up to, if your impulse tells you to go one way, go the other way. If we all did that, it could really change what our networks look like."

—By Takim Williams