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Can you be Prejudiced Against your own Students? Teacher's Unconscious Bias in the Classroom

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Most teachers would like to be neutral and treat their students fairly. However, as the saying goes, easier said than done. Psychological research shows that what people intend to do constitutes the conscious level, while the unconscious level can operate without the person's permission or even awareness. For example, a person might declare that males and females are equal in their intellectual abilities, but in actual behavior that person might prefer to work with a male partner in a challenging task. This might imply that the individual has an unconscious bias toward males in terms of intellectual ability. This is an example of a situation in which ideals are not borne out in actual reality.

Psychologists have examined this conscious–unconscious dissociation. At the extreme level, it has been described as “a split in consciousness, such as mutually unaware person systems occupying the same brain” (Greenwald & Nosek, 2009, p. 65). Researchers have found that this dissociation occurs in many contexts. This is how the typical experiment is done. The participant is first given a questionnaire to solicit their preferences, e.g. male vs. females or White vs. Black. Most people state that they are neutral and that these categories do not matter to them. This constitutes the conscious level. Afterward, the participant is asked to complete a psychological test of their unconscious attitudes such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). This test will give the participant a score, which may or may not be equivalent to that from the questionnaire. In the last phase of experiment, the participant is asked to engage in a task. The behavior in this task is analyzed by the researchers in order to determine whether it shows any signs of bias, and whether it is better predicted by the conscious or the unconscious measures.

An experiment by Glaser and Knowles (2008) illustrates this idea well. The researchers used ‘the shooter task’, which was originally developed by Correll, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2002). In this task, the participant sees a series of pictures of individuals on a computer screen. They are required to ‘shoot’ criminals that are holding hostile objections (e.g., a gun or a knife) and refrain from shooting civilians that are holding benign objects (e.g., a flashlight or a camera). The individuals shown in the picture are White or Black people, and the task requires the participant to respond as fast as possible. Obviously, the skin color of the individual in the pictures should have no effect on the decision to shoot, because it is a matter of whether the individual is holding a hostile or a benign object. Surprisingly, the participants whose scores on the implicit test showed that they were biased against Blacks also tended to misidentify Blacks as criminals and shoot them erroneously. This study gives a clear example of the effect of implicit biases on spontaneous behavior.

On a more positive note, Glaser and Knowles (2008) also found an interesting result. That is, the above results were moderated by level of attitudes toward prejudice. More specifically, those who had a negative attitude toward prejudice were able to neutralize the effect of their implicit biases on their behavior in the shooter task. These results suggest that having an implicit bias is not the end of the world, as these biases can be counteracted.

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