

Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think, and Do, by Jennifer L. Eberhardt (Viking, 2019) \$44.98 (hardcover), 340 pages, ISBN: 9780735224933

Jennifer Eberhardt has spent fifteen years conducting police trainings on implicit bias, which she defines as a mental distortion created by the architecture of our brains and derived from the disparities in society, not just a new way of calling someone a racist. In *Bias*, she presents a mixture of personal narratives and published scientific research to encourage readers to evaluate their own implicit and explicit biases. She begins her narrative by reflecting upon the first time she recognized the racial prejudices in her five-year-old son, who saw an African American man on their airplane and solely based on his skin color suspected him of being a criminal.

Beginning with the concept of recognition, Eberhardt cites research that indicates the “other-race effect”, which suggests that people are better at identifying people of their own race rather than people of other races. This effect, which has been recorded in people as young as three-months old, can intensify over time based on contextual input. One upshot of this process is to parse faces, so as to discern which people matter more to us than others. Unsurprisingly, this other-race effect is less pronounced in children adopted by parents of a different race. Eberhardt’s research shows that this propensity can assist or hinder people who are trying to recognize faces. Eberhardt herself recognizes her own first-hand experience with the other-race effect when she recalls having difficulty as a child differentiating between people of a different race, other than her own, after her family moved from a mostly black neighborhood to a mostly white neighborhood.

Facial recognition utilizes two quadrants of the human brain, and neuroplasticity studies demonstrate that the brain can adapt based on experiences, including increasing gray matter in areas depending on the task that is required. Accompanied by neuroscientists and an MRI machine, Eberhardt conducted a study to discover if there were fluctuations in brain activity when test subjects were asked to recognize faces of their same race compared to a different race. Her research found that there was increased brain activity with faces of the same race, as well as a greater ability to remember those faces. Conversely, Eberhardt found a dampened response to faces of a different race known as “repetition suppression,” suggesting that those faces are treated as being all the same. To illustrate, Eberhardt reflects on her own experience helping the local police force in a series of Chinatown robberies, during which time perpetrators were snatching purses from middle aged Asian women. These victims had difficulty identifying their assailants, regarding distinguishing their black faces in a line up. The assailants were aware of this fact and used it to their advantage, until they were apprehended using video cameras.

Next, Eberhardt addresses the issue of categorization, the grouping of like things together. This system allows our brains to process massive amounts of stimuli and leads to positive and negative associations. We use categorization for everything, from classifying foods to labeling events; however, when categorizations are applied to people we refer to them as stereotypes and prejudices. Categorizing gives us a lens to understand the world, even if that lens is not accurate, she says. Eberhardt references studies that show people pay attention to their surroundings, including how people treat each other, and make determinations about a mistreated person. Beginning in childhood, this results in people believing that the mistreated person deserves the treatment they receive. This effect is reinforced by “confirmation bias,” the ability to filter the information we receive to enforce what we already believe.

To illustrate categorization, Eberhardt recalls the interview she had with the sister of Terrance Crutcher, an unarmed man with his hands raised who was gunned down by police. Although ninety-nine percent of police encounters occur with no use of police force, black people are stopped by police at disproportionate levels relative to white people. For instance, statistics show that African Americans are more than twice as likely to be pulled over by police for vehicle equipment violations, compared to their white counterparts. Black people are much more likely to be subjected to police violence and verbal abuse. Eberhardt references studies which show that people often think black men are taller, heavier, and stronger than their white counterparts, and that the actions of black people are considered more aggressive and violent than similar actions made by white people.

Eberhardt uses a similar framework to assess the United States criminal justice system, and finds statistical bias leading to blacks being asked for higher bail and spending longer times in prison than their white counterparts for similar crimes. This leads to the prolonged loss of income, home, and parental rights, which incentivize them to accept unfavorable plea deals. These statistics are mitigated when blacks employ private attorneys rather than public defenders, which is a sign of disparity based on income and resources. Upon conviction, the difficulty for black men only increases. Parolees can be searched at-will by officers, and they are often sent back to prison for parole violations, such as being unemployed. Eberhardt cites studies that show black men receive fewer job offers than white men, and black men with clean records receive no more job offers than white men who have been convicted of crimes. African Americans, who represent twelve percent of the United States population, make up forty percent of the United States prison population. They also receive the death penalty at higher rates, and homicides involving white victims lead more frequently to death penalty sentences than homicides with black victims. Similar cases of bias affect other areas including employment, education, and housing, and are not just limited to black people, but also affect minority groups, immigrants, women, and the homeless.

Eberhardt reflects on the racist history of the United States before addressing the current state of the nation with regards to explicit bias. She has found through interviews with, for example, those who were present at the “Unite the Right” Neo-Nazi rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017, that the growth of minority populations in the United States, has led some white people to become uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a minority. “Feeling outnumbered can signal a threat to the legacy of dominance and the white privilege that it affords” (Eberhardt, 2019, p. 231). Charlottesville is only one example where armed right-wing white supremacists threatened the populace with their guns and bullet proof vests, and minority students were forced to flee to their dorm rooms to avoid the mob. This is America where Thomas Jefferson, who wrote that “all men are created equal,” owned more slaves in the state of Virginia than anyone else at the time. However, there is some reason for hope in the current era. As police brutality is thrust into the spotlight and people of all races are called upon to recognize their own biases, change is on the horizon.

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