

# How The Concept Of Implicit Bias Came Into Being

Implicit bias has become a key part of the national dialogue on race in America. To learn more about the history of the term, we turn to Mahzarin Banaji, one of the researchers who founded the theory.

RENEE MONTAGNE, HOST:

Implicit bias - that term has been used a lot lately after several high-profile shootings of black men by police.

DAVID GREENE, HOST:

And it's also become a divisive topic in this presidential election. The term refers to how attitudes or stereotypes can affect what we say and do without a person being conscious of it.

MONTAGNE: To find out more about where this concept comes from, we turn to Mahzarin Banaji. She and another psychologist, Anthony Greenwald, wrote a book called "Blindspot," outlining a theory they came up with 20 years ago known as implicit bias. And she told us about the moment she realized our decisions are guided by forces we're not even aware of.

MAHZARIN BANAJI: So just to go back a little bit to the beginning, in the late 1990s, I did a very simple experiment with Tony Greenwald in which I was to quickly associate dark-skinned faces - faces of black Americans - with negative words. I had to use a computer key whenever I saw a black face or a negative word, like devil or bomb, war, things like that.

And likewise, there was another key on the keyboard that I had to strike whenever I saw a white face or a good word, a word like love, peace, joy. I was able to do this very easily. But when the test then switched the pairing and I

had to use the same computer key to identify a black face with good things and white faces and bad things, my fingers appeared to be frozen on the keyboard.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BANAJI: I literally could not find the right - the right key. That experience is a humbling one. It is even a humiliating one because you come face to face with the fact that you are not the person you thought you were.

(SOUNDBITE OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE)

LESTER HOLT: Secretary Clinton, last week, you said we've got to do everything possible to...

BANAJI: The first time I heard Hillary Clinton use the phrase implicit bias in the first debate, it didn't go unnoticed.

(SOUNDBITE OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE)

HILLARY CLINTON: Lester, I think implicit bias is a problem for everyone, not just police. I think, unfortunately, too many of us in our great country jump to conclusions about each other. And therefore, I think we need all of us to be asking hard questions about, you know, why am I feeling this way?

BANAJI: She answered it that this is not just about the police. This is about all of us, that we ought to be asking ourselves, why do I have this feeling?

(SOUNDBITE OF VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE)

ELAINE QUIJANO: Welcome to the first and only vice presidential debate of 2016.

BANAJI: When I heard Mike Pence speak about implicit bias, it was obvious that he didn't know what it was.

(SOUNDBITE OF VICE PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE)

MIKE PENCE: When an African-American police officer's involved in a police-action shooting involving an African-American, why would Hillary Clinton accuse that African-American police officer of implicit bias?

BANAJI: That's when I thought, oh, Mike Pence doesn't get it. He thinks that if a black police officer shoots at a black person, that can't be implicit bias. That's how much work we have to do that we haven't even gotten the simple idea through that women don't hire women and black police officers shoot black people because the bias is implicit.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

BANAJI: In order to just think about where implicit bias comes from, it's a good idea to think about it as a combination of two things. First, our brains - human brains have a certain way in which we go about picking up information, learning it. If I repeatedly see that doctors are male and nurses are female, I'm going to learn that. But the second part to implicit bias is the culture in which we live.

There is a culture that, for whatever reasons, has led to men being surgeons and women being nurses. If I lived in a culture where the opposite happened, I would have the opposite bias. At any moment when we discover things about ourselves or about the world that are new, we have to expect the kind of reaction that we're getting. But the mark of an evolved society is how quickly do we come to terms with it?

How quickly do we realize that finding out that we're biased need not mean that we have to remain biased? So I have great hope just because I look at the history of this country, where we used to be and where we are today, and I see nothing but a path that is on the way towards doing better.

MONTAGNE: Psychologist Mahzarin Banaji, who helped come up with the

theory of implicit bias.

*Copyright © 2016 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website [terms of use](#) and [permissions](#) pages at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) for further information.*

*NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by [Verb8tm, Inc.](#), an NPR contractor, and produced using a proprietary transcription process developed with NPR. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio record.*



# Project Implicit®

The 2013 general audience book that fully explains the IAT



## PROJECT IMPLICIT SOCIAL ATTITUDES

Log in or register to find out your implicit associations about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other topics!

 

Or, continue as a guest by selecting from our available language/nation demonstration sites:

## PROJECT IMPLICIT MENTAL HEALTH

Find out your implicit associations about self-esteem, anxiety, alcohol, and other topics!

## PROJECT IMPLICIT FEATURED TASK

Measure your implicit associations with U.S. presidential candidates