Teaching: Why the Bias Blind Spot Matters and How to Reduce It

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

**More teaching resources in this Observer: The Perils of Post-Event Identification**


Bias pervades life. Systemic racism exists, but we fail to acknowledge our own racial bias. Rational behavior is rare, but we assure ourselves that we’re less susceptible to biased decision-making. Conformity is common, but we doubt we would follow others’ mistaken judgments. According to Emily Pronin and Lori Hazel (2023), we are blind to our own biases—causing us to recognize bias in others but rarely in ourselves.
This bias blind spot is a robust phenomenon. Worldwide, researchers have replicated it for more than 50 biases, such as the self-serving bias, hindsight bias, and many others (Pronin & Hazel, 2023). The bias blind spot touches many significant life domains, including forensics, medicine, human resources, criminal justice, and political polarization.

But why does the bias blind spot matter? For one, it interferes with accurate self-knowledge and fuels interpersonal conflict. To ignore our own biases is to ignore a part of ourselves. When we disagree with others, being blind to our own biases can set into motion what Pronin and Hazel (2023) call a “spiral of conflict.” Both parties in a disagreement tend to view their adversaries as biased and irrational and themselves as unbiased and rational (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008), but little progress or diplomacy is possible unless people become attuned to their own biases.

Read all of the articles from the September/October Observer.

Teaching students about the bias blind spot can help them increase their self-knowledge and reduce interpersonal misunderstandings and conflicts. The first activity shows students how the bias blind spot is a universal feature of human psychology. The second activity encourages students to consider why the bias blind spot matters. The third activity involves students designing interventions to reduce the bias blind spot. Students can complete each activity regardless of whether their course meets face-to-face or virtually.

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**Student Activities**

**Activity 1: The bias blind spot is universal**

Introduce students to the term *bias blind spot*, which refers to the tendency for people to underestimate their susceptibility to bias relative to others (Pronin et al., 2002). For example, people may agree that political bias exists, but they will often believe they have less political bias than others. In effect, we are blind to our own biases.

Ask students to identify whether the bias blind spot exists for the following biases:

1. Self-interest bias
2. Racial bias
3. Hindsight bias
4. Pre-trial publicity bias
5. Confirmation bias

If students are confused about the definition of each bias, have them use an artificially intelligent program (ChatGPT, Bard) to look up the definition. Which biases did they select? Why?

Next, ask students to identify where research participants demonstrate the bias blind spot:
Which locations did they select? Why?

Finally, tell students that the bias blind spot exists for all of the biases listed (and many others). Also, the bias blind spot has been found among people in each listed geographic area. Hence, the bias blind spot is a universal feature of human psychology.

**Activity 2: Why the bias blind spot matters**

Begin by asking students why the bias blind spot matters. Have students find a partner and discuss how the bias blind spot undermines accurate self-knowledge. How might such inaccurate self-knowledge influence people’s physical and mental health, career choices, and purchasing decisions? How might the bias blind spot create conflict between friends, family members, and romantic relationship partners?

**Activity 3: Designing interventions to reduce the bias blind spot**

According to Pronin and Hazel (2023), the bias blind spot is difficult to eradicate. The best that we can do is encourage students to design interventions that reduce people’s propensity to use it. Ask students to read the scenario and select one of the subsequent scientifically supported options to design an intervention to reduce the bias blind spot related to political partisanship.

Markus recently graduated from college with a degree in finance and applied for an entry-level position at a local bank. His resume was strong, which led to his invitation for a face-to-face interview. As his interviewer looked up the candidate’s name on social media websites, he saw that Markus drove a car with a “Democrats of America” bumper sticker.

The interviewer, in contrast, makes frequent donations to Republican political candidates and attends Republican political events. Although many other human resource employees might make biased decisions, the interviewer believed he was less prone than others to let his political beliefs bias his hiring decisions. After conducting the interview, he did not offer Markus the job.

Four months later, a third-party firm analyzes recordings of the interview. The bank fires the interviewer due to “biased treatment of the applicant and discussion of unrelated topics, including occasional arguments about political candidates and their policy positions.”

If the bank hired you to prevent this situation from happening again, which scientifically supported intervention would you use? Why?

(1) **Remaining blind:** Ensure all interviewers remain blind to job candidates’ political affiliations. Forbid any action that may disclose a candidate’s political beliefs.
(2) **Pre-commitment**: Require that interviewers sign a statement that their interview and decision making will prioritize candidates’ skills for the designated position.

(3) **Education**: Require that interviewers complete a short educational seminar about the bias blind spot and how it can harm their ability to make unbiased hiring decisions.

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**References**
