Empowering People to Break the Bias Habit: 
Creating Inclusion and Reducing Bias 
Patricia G. Devine & William T. L. Cox

Unintentional Bias as a Habit
Stereotypes and biases spring to mind effortlessly and often without awareness, even among those who consciously renounce prejudice. Bias persists among those who renounce prejudice, because we are all exposed to stereotypes early and often. These stereotypes and biases become “habits of mind”. Bias is therefore an ordinary, pervasive byproduct of socialization experiences. These habits of mind lead well-intentioned people to be unwittingly complicit in the perpetuation of bias.

These habits of mind can be broken, however, with these necessary conditions:

Motivation to eliminate the habit

Awareness of personal vulnerability to the habit and how it manifests, to identify the leverage points for disrupting the habit

Strategies to disrupt the habit and replace it with intended responses

Effort over time to break the habit

Leverage Points for Disruption: Bias Constructs
Reconstructing Criteria - Unintentionally adjusting the value of specific criteria to favor an applicant from a stereotype-congruent group

Prescriptive Norms - Stereotypes set up assumptions about how people should and should not behave, with social penalties for violating these norms

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy - Expectations lead you to behave in a way that causes others to behave the way you expected them to act

Attentional Spotlight - Stereotypes lead your attention to stereotype-consistent information and away from stereotype-inconsistent information

Confirmation Bias - Giving confirmatory information more weight than disconfirmatory information

Untested Assumptions - People often treat their own untested assumptions as if they were confirmatory information

Ineffective Strategies
Stereotype Suppression - Banishing stereotypes from one’s mind (e.g., “just try not to stereotype!”)

Colorblindness - Attempting to ignore race when interacting with racial minorities

Belief in Personal Objectivity - Attempting to be and believing that you can be objective when making decisions
Effective Strategies to Disrupt and Replace Bias

**Stereotype Replacement** - *Detect* the influence of stereotypes and biases, *Reflect* on the source of the stereotype and its effects on people, *Reject* the stereotypical portrayal or thought, and *replace* it with one that is non-stereotypical

**Modify Your Environment** - Detect images in your environment that reinforce stereotypes, evaluate what messages are in the environment about who belongs and/or succeeds, increase representation of underrepresented groups

**Seek Individuating Information** - Prevent stereotypes from filling in gaps by focusing on the details that make someone a unique individual. Obtain more information on specific qualifications, past experiences, etc., before making a decision

**Perspective Taking** - Imagine what it would feel like to be in another person’s situation

**Seek Situational Explanations** - Think about how the situation may have influenced a behavior more than a personal characteristic. Actively consider things outside of the person as possible explanations for behavior

**Committing to Criteria** - Decide what criteria are important before any applicant is seen

**Increasing Opportunities for Contact** - Seek opportunities for greater interaction with members of other groups; Seek opportunities for greater exposure to movies, books, and other media from members of other groups

**Speaking up when bias occurs** - *Source:* Allies and authority figures hold lots of sway. *Tone:* Not finger-pointing; the goal should be working together. *Content:* Concrete instances, not abstract accusations. When possible, offer explanations or viable solutions.

www.biashabit.com

Patricia G. Devine  
Kenneth and Mamie Clark Professor of Psychology  
Department of Psychology  
University of Wisconsin - Madison  
pgdevine@wisc.edu  
https://sites.google.com/site/devinesocialpsych/  
Twitter: @DevineLab

William T. L. Cox  
Assistant Scientist  
Department of Psychology  
University of Wisconsin - Madison  
william.cox@wisc.edu  
www.sciencecox.com  
Twitter: @ScienceCox

facebook.com/devinelab  
facebook.com/ScienceCox