

Understanding Implicit Bias: The Power of Reflection

by

Elizaveta Friesem
Media Education Lab

LESSON 1: Edward Adelson's Checkerboard Illusion

LESSON 2: The Implicit Association Test

LESSON 3: Considering the Consequences of Implicit Bias

View the 5-minute [teacher orientation video](#) before you implement these lessons

Overview

In these three lessons, students will discover Edward Adelson's checkerboard illusion and discuss what this illusion reveals about our brain's ability to perceive "objective" reality. They will then use this discovery to reflect on the way they communicate with each other, including their use of mediated forms of communication. Students then take the Implicit Association Test and discuss implicit biases/stereotypes that this test reveals. They explore the brain's propensity to categorize people and reflect on the way implicit biases and categorization influence how people interpret and create media messages with stereotypes. Finally, students choose to create some form of media to reflect on their learning by composing a poem, rap or song lyric, a set of three memes, or a journal entry.

Learning Objectives:

- Discover features of our brain's perception that influence communication between people.
- Reflect on biases and how they shape media texts we receive and produce.
- Discover stereotypes that can influence our actions
- Reflect on how these stereotypes manifest themselves in media texts we produce.

Common Core State Standards

- 1) [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.6](#) (Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information).
- 2) [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.11-12.9](#) (Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research).
- 3) [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1](#) (Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively).

Terms:

Implicit attitudes: Settled ways of thinking and feeling (about different objects, people, and phenomena) that we are not aware of.

Implicit biases: Unconscious prejudice in favor or against certain kinds of people.

Objectivity: Lack of bias and prejudice, seeing things the way they "really are."

Subjectivity: The quality of being influenced by one's personal feelings and opinions.

Stereotype: Mental shortcut, generalized and simplified understanding of a particular type of person or thing.

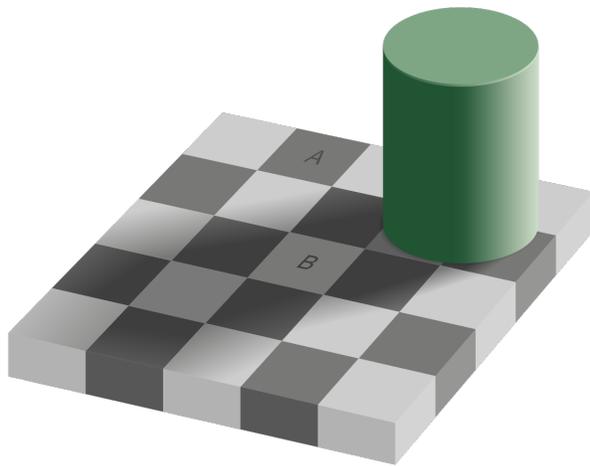
Social group: Subset of society consisting of people who share similar characteristics.

Categorization: The process of defining objects, people, and phenomena by placing them into classes or groups.

LESSON 1: Edward Adelson's Checkerboard Illusion

Engage. (10 minutes)

Show students [Edward Adelson's checkerboard illusion](#). Ask them whether they think squares A and B are the same color or different. If your students have computers, you can show the



illusion using a projector and then have students work individually or in pairs to check your claim that A and B are the same color. Students can use the Paint program (on PC or Mac) to cut out square A and B and put them together. If students do not have computers, you can do the same using printouts of the illusion, and scissors.

Analyze and Discuss (20 minutes)

Ask students to respond to the following questions:

1. "What does this illusion tell us about our brain's ability to perceive 'objective' reality?" Discuss the terms "objectivity" and "subjectivity."
2. "How can our brain's biases impact the way we communicate with each other?" Discuss the terms "implicit attitude," "implicit bias."
3. "How can our brain's biases impact media texts we produce?" Discuss how all media texts - no matter who produced them - reveal biases of people who created them.

Summarize and Extend (10 minutes)

Do not forget to acknowledge your own biases!¹ Talk about your own experience with Edward Adelson's checkerboard illusion. Discuss how having biases does not make a person bad (because everybody has biases). Emphasize the importance of not being afraid to acknowledge our biases and subjectivity.

¹ Suggested language prompt: "We are often told that having biases is bad. We are told that it is important to be always objective. However, we all have biases. This means that we are influenced by our feelings, opinions, and backgrounds. We have biases because we are human. For example, we have biases about race, gender, physical ability, or age. The problem happens when we deny having biases, and ignore how our biases can make us act in ways that hurt other people. We should not be ashamed to acknowledge our biases. We should do our best to be aware of our biases and make sure that we do not hurt anybody."

LESSON 2: The Implicit Assumption Test

Engage (10-20 minutes²)

Have your students take Implicit Association test, which is available for free at implicit.harvard.edu - click on PROJECT IMPLICIT SOCIAL ATTITUDES.

If you can - set up the test before the class starts so that students have enough time to take it! You may prefer to have students take the test as a homework activity. If so, then ask students about their experiences with the test. Were they surprised by their results?

Analyze and Discuss (20 minutes)

Ask students:

1. "What did you learn about your perceptions of different social groups?" Discuss the terms "social groups" and "categorization."
2. "How might these perceptions influence stories you tell about different people?" Discuss the terms "stereotype" and "implicit bias."
3. "How might these perceptions influence media representations we produce?" (Discuss how all media texts - no matter who produced them - reveal biases of people who created them.)

Reflect and Extend (10 minutes)

Encourage students to take different versions³ of the test at home. Do not forget to take the test Chances are, you will discover that you also have some biases. Make sure to mention that in class. Tell students that having biases is not a problem (it might be unavoidable because this is how our brains work). The problem happens when we do not acknowledge our biases and do not reflect on how they can influence our perception and communication (including media texts we produce).

LESSON 3: Considering the Consequences of Implicit Bias

Engage (10 minutes)

Explain that students will be creating media to represent the ideas explored in the previous two lessons. Students work with a partner or in a small group of three, choosing freely from the following questions to discuss:

1. Why does it matter that people understand that they have implicit biases?
2. What are some advantages to knowing that you have biases? What are some disadvantages?

² Before the beginning of the test you will be asked to fill in a questionnaire. You can skip this part by declining to answer each question. However, if you have time, the questionnaire results will help Harvard researchers who created Implicit Association Test to learn more about implicit attitudes.

³ Available versions include: Gender-Career IAT, Arab-Muslim IAT, Weight IAT, Sexuality IAT, Disability IAT, etc.

3. What are some possible positive consequences to having a better understanding of your own biases? What are some possible negative consequences?
4. Can people's biases change over time? Why or why not?
5. Why should people who create stories, make films, compose music or create media have a good understanding of their implicit biases?

Compose (30 minutes)

Students work individually on a media project of their choice, selecting from the following activities and completing one, working under deadline pressure:

1. *Poem, Rap or Song Lyric.* Write a poem or song lyrics about your reflection on your own implicit biases and the role of stereotypes in your life.
2. *Meme.* Create 3 memes to depict the consequences of not being aware of your implicit biases using an [online meme generator](#).
3. *Journal Entry.* Describe your experience learning about perception, stereotypes and implicit biases and explain how these ideas are relevant to your own life.
4. *Comic.* Create a short story involving two or more characters that informs people about the concepts you have learned using an [online comic maker](#).

Share and Reflect (10 minutes)

Invite students to share a sample of their creative work and offer warm feedback to acknowledge their reflective thinking. Summarize a couple of ideas that emerged from student work. Offer your own thoughts about how awareness of stereotypes and implicit bias affects you as a teacher. Encourage students to share what they learned with their family and friends.

About the Media Education Lab

The Media Education Lab advances the quality of digital and media literacy education through scholarship and community service. We provide professional development programs, curriculum materials and resources, and research and consulting services. Learn more:

www.mediaeducationlab.com

