PSYCHOLOGY

Locus of bias

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Implicit biases are automatic associations we have towards other people—for example, based on their race—that may shape our expectations of their abilities and behaviour. This, in turn, may lead to discriminatory behaviour, which means that finding ways to adapt these patterns of thought would be of great importance. Unsurprisingly, a considerable research effort is underway to solve this question.

A recent study supported the view that, while interventions can affect short-term changes, a person's implicit biases are inherently stable and will therefore resurface after a short delay.

Heidi Vuletich of the University of North Carolina and colleagues now present a new analysis of this influential study that paints a different picture. In their analysis, the authors took the structural inequality of the campuses where the participants studied into account.

Crucially, this analysis suggests that the campuses themselves were marked by stable collective biases, with campuses high in structural inequality showing larger implicit biases.

This analysis suggests that while individual people may be able to change their (often unconscious) attitudes, counteracting implicit biases will require building environments with little structural inequality.

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