

# Managers exhibit bias based on race, gender, disability and sexual orientation, study finds

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In a study that examined bias in the workplace, a UF researcher found that those in management positions demonstrate explicit and implicit bias toward others from marginalized groups and often express more

implicit bias than people who are not in management.

The study, published this month in *Frontiers in Psychology*, drew from 10 years of data publicly available from Harvard University's Project Implicit, a repository of information from more than 5 million people.

George Cunningham, professor and chair of the UF Department of Sport Management, and his co-author analyzed responses from people who identified themselves as managers and compared their assessments of racial, gender, disability and [sexual orientation](#) biases to those from people in 22 other occupational designations.

"Stereotypes and prejudices harm workplace experiences and advancement opportunities for people from minoritized and subjugated backgrounds," said Cunningham, who also is director of the Laboratory for Diversity in Sport. "While people undoubtedly experience mistreatment from coworkers and customers, our work shows that managers are also likely to express bias, particularly in implicit forms."

Cunningham explained that while a great deal of research exists using the Project Implicit data, he had not seen any that compared biases among the different professional categories. Because the web-based test provides occupational codes, he could compare people whose primary role is in management, like a CEO or varying types of mid-management, to people in other employment positions.

The study's authors learned that claims of racial, gender and disability discrimination were the most frequently filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission between 1997 and 2021. Because sexual orientation hadn't been a federally protected employment characteristic, they drew data from UCLA's Williams Institute, which reports that 45% of those who identify as LGBTQ+ have experienced some form of discrimination at work.

"Once we saw that race, gender, disability and sexual orientation-based forms of mistreatment are all prevalent in the U.S. workforce, we determined this warranted examination of managers' biases in these areas," Cunningham said.

Implicit bias occurs automatically and unintentionally, but it affects judgements, decision-making and behaviors, Cunningham said. Research has shown that this unintentional discrimination has implications for many aspects of society, including in health care, policing, education and organizational practices.

With explicit bias, individuals are aware of their prejudices and attitudes toward certain groups.

In Cunningham's study, implicit biases were assessed using the Implicit Association Test, or IAT.

Explicit attitudes were assessed using the Feeling Thermometer, where participants responded to items measuring their attitudes toward different groups.

"With respect to explicit biases, the scores as we calculated them indicated that people working in management occupations had an explicit bias in favor of people without disabilities, men relative to women working outside the home, White people and heterosexual people," Cunningham said.

For [implicit bias](#) scores, the researchers used a previously established benchmark of degrees, including neutral, slight, moderate and strong and found managers held a moderate preference for the groups in the majority. The paper goes on to break down the results by explicit and implicit bias, by different occupations and in relation to each of the four targeted groups of people.

"Of the 176 comparisons, we found statistically significant differences in 58, or about a third of the time," Cunningham said.

Respondents to the Project Implicit survey who identified as managers had similar levels of bias to those in what researchers called white collar occupations, like medical doctors and those in the business and financial sector. They had less bias than those working in physical labor and blue-collar jobs, like food production, transportation and protective services. Additionally, the managers expressed more bias than people whose job code involved bettering the [human condition](#) and protecting the environment, like educators, artists and [social scientists](#), according to the study.

"It's not that managers are more biased than everybody else or that they are less biased than everybody else, but it's clustered," Cunningham said. "Our original question was, do they have biases, do they vary from others with different occupation codes, and will that impact claims that employees make? This tells us, yes, they do, and the type of bias depends not only on the focus but whether it's implicit or explicit."

Cunningham said their study also showed there is a disconnect between managers' explicit and implicit bias ratings, especially when it came to disability. Their responses indicated they explicitly didn't believe they had biases regarding people with disabilities, while their implicit [bias](#) regarding this group was the highest of all the others.

The value in studies like this, Cunningham said, is to build awareness for our implicit biases.

"The more we're aware of it, the more likely we are to take steps to help lessen the impact," he said. "Training, equity advisors, checks and balances and other practices should be imbedded in the system—not once-a-year activities.

"The bigger issue, though, is to change the way our society operates," he said. "Managers can't do as much about how society functions, but they can do things about how their organizations function."

**More information:** George B. Cunningham et al, Bias among managers: Its prevalence across a decade and comparison across occupations, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1034712](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1034712)

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