Public Attitudes to Disfigurement in 2017

At the launch of the campaign for face equality in 2008, Changing Faces commissioned research to examine public attitudes to disfigurement. This found that a huge majority of people had unconscious bias against people who had a disfigurement. For the first national Face Equality Day in 2017, the research was repeated to see how attitudes have improved.

Implicit Attitude Tests

Implicit Attitude Tests (IATs) are a tool used to detect a person’s automatic associations to another person or group of people. Developed by social psychologists at Harvard University in the 1990s, IATs are regularly used to measure bias based on a range of factors including race, gender, and sexuality. The tests are often also known as ‘unconscious bias’ tests.

The Changing Faces IAT in 2008

In 2008, Changing Faces commissioned COG Research to develop and run an IAT to test public attitudes towards people who have a disfigurement. Participants were shown eight images of individuals who have a facial disfigurement, which were matched with images of people without a facial disfigurement. The images were matched on age and gender.

Participants would then select either positive or negative words attached to each image. These included ‘easy-going’, ‘approachable’, ‘friendly’, ‘happy’ (positive words), and ‘awkward’, ‘misfit’, ‘unfriendly’ and ‘grumpy’ (negative words). The IAT software measures the time it takes the participant to associate a positive or negative association to an image.

The Changing Faces IAT in 2017

COG Research was commissioned to run the IAT in March 2017, using a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults across the UK. Key findings were:

- There has been some improvement but negative bias still exists: two-thirds still hold negative bias compared with more than nine out of ten people in 2008
- Women are slightly less biased than men, and younger people also showed less bias
- Conscious attitudes are similar to 2008, with some minor improvements
In the 2017 sample, average negative bias was down to 236 milliseconds (ms) compared with 380ms in 2008. Whilst this does show an improvement, the average negative racial bias in tests in the United States is 178ms.

Men showed a higher average bias than women in the latest test, but the proportion showing bias was about the same, with 68% of women and 70% of men showing bias. The latest data also shows that those in the 45-64 age group show the greatest levels of bias.

Participants were then asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about a person with a disfigurement, to test their conscious reactions and enable correlation with the results of the unconscious bias tests. These statements included, ‘more successful, dynamic, motivated, accomplished and more likely to achieve’, and ‘more of a failure, dull, limited, ordinary and unmotivated’. Whilst the unconscious bias results show an encouraging shift in people’s attitudes, these latest results show that there has been little change in conscious beliefs.

When asked to describe people with disfigurements, participants in 2017 were more likely than those in 2008 to use positive words and attributes such as ‘achiever’, and were more likely to rate someone with a disfigurement as ‘successful’, ‘eligible’, and ‘accomplished’.

Participants were given the opportunity to leave free-text comments about how they feel when they meet someone with a facial disfigurement. A comparison between the 2008 and 2017 responses shows an increase in empathy for people who have a disfigurement, but there were still some who showed a lack of understanding; one remarked ‘[I’d] recoil a bit – catching?’.

**Conclusions**

Changing Faces is encouraged by the shift in public attitudes that the latest Implicit Attitudes Test shows. As the charity marks its 25th birthday, it can take some satisfaction that its campaigning activity has contributed to change.

However, a shift from 92% to 66% in nine years suggests that achieving face equality will take a considerable number of years. Assuming the same rate of improvement into the future, reducing implicit bias to single figures will take more than thirty years.

This paper and the full IAT results should be viewed alongside Disfigurement in the UK, a report published by Changing Faces in May 2017 based on a survey of more than 800 people who have a disfigurement. Echoing some of the findings of the IAT, the report paints a depressing picture of British society, where people who have a disfigurement are facing discrimination, harassment, abuse and challenges in every aspect of their lives.

Taken together, these IAT results and Disfigurement in the UK show how everyone needs to consider the bias they hold against people who have a disfigurement – whether they realise it or not. Until we collectively acknowledge and reflect upon our implicit biases, we cannot hope to change them.

**Further information**

For further information on IAT and Changing Faces’ campaign for face equality, please visit our website at [www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk), email [faceequality@changingfaces.org.uk](mailto:faceequality@changingfaces.org.uk), or call 0345 450 0275.

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