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# Understanding Unconscious Bias and Unintentional Racism

Acknowledging our possible biases and working together openly is essential for developing community in our schools.

BY JEAN MOULE

**I**n the blink of an eye, unconscious bias was visible to me, an African American. A man saw my face as I walked into the store and unconsciously checked his wallet. On the street, a woman catches my eye a half block away and moves her purse from the handle of her baby's stroller to her side as she arranges the baby's blanket. In the airport, a man signals to his wife to move her purse so it is not over the back of her chair, which is adjacent to the one I am moving toward. What is happening in these instances? Were these actions general safety precautions? If so, why did the sight only of my brown face, not the others who moved among these individuals, elicit these actions?

I believe these are examples of "blink of the eye" racism. Such unconscious biases lead to unintentional racism: racism that is usually invisible even *and especially* to those who perpetrate it. Yet, most people do not want to be considered racist or capable of racist acts because the spoken and unspoken norm is that "good people do not discriminate or in any way participate in racism" (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005, p. 2).

Such unconscious biases affect all of our relationships, whether they are fleeting relationships in airports or longer term relationships between teachers and students, teachers and parents, teachers and other educators. Understanding our own biases is a first step toward improving the interactions that we have with all people and is essential if we hope to build deep community within our schools.

Biases are rooted in stereotypes and prejudices. A stereotype is a simplistic image or distorted



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truth about a person or group based on a prejudgment of habits, traits, abilities, or expectations (Weinstein and Mellen 1997). Ethnic and racial stereotypes are learned as part of normal socialization and are consistent among many populations and across time. An excellent illustration of this phenomenon is a recent exchange that repeated Clark's classic 1954 doll study. In a video, completed by a 17-year-old film student and disseminated through the media, a young black child clearly reflects society's prejudice: The child describes the black doll as looking "bad" and the white doll as "nice" (Edney 2006). Children internalize our society's biases and prejudices, as have all of us; they are just a little less able to hide it. I am reminded of the story of a 4-year-old in an affluent suburb who remarked to her mother upon seeing a young Latina while in line at the grocery store, "Look, mommy, a baby maid."

And when we receive evidence that confronts our deeply held and usually unrecognized biases, the human brain usually finds ways to return to stereotypes.

The human brain uses a mechanism called "re-fencing" when confronted with evidence contrary to the stereotype. Allport coined the term: "When a fact cannot fit into a mental field, the exception is acknowledged, but the field is hastily fenced in again and not allowed to remain dangerously open" (Allport 1954, p. 23). This is illustrated by such statements as "some of my best friends are black." That statement, while used to deny bias, has within it the seeds of a defense of negative feelings toward blacks. The context of the statement usually means that "my best friend" is an exception to stereotypes and, therefore, that other blacks would *not* be my friends. Thompson (2003) refers to this as *absolution* through a connected relationship (i.e., I am absolved from racism because my best friend is black). Dovidio and Gaertner describe this inability to connect stated beliefs and unconscious bias as *aversive racism*, "the inherent contradiction that exists when the denial of personal prejudice co-exists with underlying unconscious negative

## UNCOVERING BIASES

Because people are more likely to act out of unconscious or hidden bias, knowing that you have a bias for or against a group may cause you to compensate and more carefully consider your possible responses or actions. Acknowledging biases often opens doors for learning and allows people to consciously work for harmony in classrooms and communities (Polite and Saenger 2003). How do we find a key to unlock this door to the mind? The Implicit Association Test (IAT) has helped millions of people — those who accept the often startling results — reveal their unconscious biases to themselves (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>).

Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji developed the test in the mid-1990s because "it is well known that people don't always 'speak their minds,' and it is suspected that people don't always 'know their minds'" (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). The IAT "presents a method that convincingly demonstrates the divergences of our conscious thoughts and our unconscious biases," according to the Harvard web site on Project Implicit.

The IAT may be taken on this site —  
[www.tolerance.org/hidden\\_bias/tutorials/04.html](http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/tutorials/04.html)

Strangely enough, the first evidence of this unconscious bias came from insects and flowers. Greenwald made a list of 25 insect names and 25 flower names and found that it was far easier to place the flowers in groups with pleasant words and insects in groups with unpleasant words than the reverse. It was just difficult to "hold a mental association of insects with words such as 'dream,' 'candy,' and 'heaven,' and flowers with words such as 'evil,' 'poison' and 'devil'" (Vedantam 2005, p. 3).

Greenwald then took the next step and used stereotypically white-sounding names, such as Adam and Emily, and black-sounding names, such as Jamal and Lakisha, and grouped them with pleasant and unpleasant words. According to Vedantam, Greenwald himself was surprised: "I had as much trouble pairing African-American names with pleasant words as I did insect names with pleasant words" (Vedantam 2005, p. 3). His collaborator, Banaji, was even more self-reflective, " 'I was deeply embarrassed,' she recalls. 'I was humbled in a way that few experiences in my life have humbled me'" (p. 3).

This unconscious pairing has direct real-world consequences. Unconscious bias allows people who consciously said they wanted qualified minority employees to then unconsciously rate

feelings and beliefs” (2005, p. 2).

In many situations, from either the dominant or the oppressed, simple unconscious associations may drastically change outcomes. An example is Steele and Aaronson’s (1995) work on *stereotype threat*, in which the performance of African-American students in a testing situation was cut in half by asking them to identify their race at the start of the test. This simple act unconsciously reminded students of the stereotypes connected with their race. Moreover, when asked at the end of the test, the students who were primed to remember their race were unable to identify the reminder as a factor in their poorer test score (Steele 1997).

In ambiguous situations, people’s minds may also *reconstruct* a situation in order to conform to their stereotypes. An example is a study of people who harbor negative attitudes about African Americans: In a quickly seen image in which a white man with a weapon chases a black man, some people reverse the

race of the perpetrator of the violence in order to make it conform with their preconceived notions (Diller and Moule 2005). Such unconscious biases have a role in determining the length of jail sentences (Vedantam 2005) and the fact that, regardless of explicit racial prejudices, police officers are more likely to shoot an unarmed black target than an unarmed white target (Correll et al. 2002).

Regarding violence, it is important to remember that we are programmed to quickly discern who is enemy and who is friend, for in the past — and certainly in many places in the world today — the ability to quickly identify friend or foe may be a matter of life or death (Begley 2004).

While I started this piece with evidence of people who responded to their gut reactions to my brown skin in surprising nonverbal ways, many of the same people would be quite gracious if given another second or two. Recent research shows that while most people have an instant activity in the “fight or flight”

résumés with black-sounding names as less qualified. With other factors held constant, white-sounding names at the top of résumés triggered 50% more callbacks than African-American names. Human resources managers were stunned by the results. Explicit bias can occur not only without the intent to discriminate, but despite explicit desires to recruit minorities (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

In *See No Bias*, Vedantam (2005) shares the disappointment and surprise that two recent test takers experienced when they found that their results on the Implicit Association Test did not mesh with their perceived views of themselves. To the dismay of these individuals, the test results were also in conflict with their life and career goals. Vedantam describes in detail a woman, an activist, taking a recent version of the test:

The woman brought up a test on her computer from a Harvard University web site. It was really very simple: All it asked her to do was distinguish between a series of black and white faces. When she saw a black face, she was to hit a key on the left; when she saw a white face, she was to hit a key on the right. Next, she was asked to distinguish between a series of positive and negative words. Words such as “glorious” and “wonderful” required a left key, words such as “nasty” and “awful” required a right key. The test remained simple when two categories were combined: The activist hit the left key if

she saw either a white face or a positive word, and hit the right key if she saw either a black face or a negative word.

Then the groupings were reversed. The woman’s index fingers hovered over her keyboard. The test now required her to group black faces with positive words, and white faces with negative words. She leaned forward intently. She made no mistakes, but it took her longer to correctly sort the words and images.

Her result appeared on the screen, and the activist became very silent. The test found she had a bias for whites over blacks.

“It surprises me I have any preferences at all,” she said. “By the work I do, by my education, my background. I’m progressive, and I think I have no bias. Being a minority myself, I don’t feel I should or would have biases.”

“I’m surprised,” the woman said. She bit her lip. “And disappointed.” (p. 2)

Such reactions should not really be a surprise according to the writings of many white anti-racist activists, including Tim Wise, who acknowledge residual racism still inside them. Wise notes how unconscious bias relegates the role of whiteness or race “to a nonfactor in the minds of whites” (2005, p. 18). When the role of whiteness or race becomes clear to a person, such as the activist described above, surprise and disappointment are likely results.

amygdala part of their brains upon encountering an *unexpected* person or situation, that first reaction is often consciously overridden in a nanosecond by many people in order to overcome built-in biases and respond as their better, undiscriminating selves. This

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ability to overcome embedded biases is particularly important when we consider that, “although many white Americans consider themselves unbiased, when unconscious stereotypes are measured, some 90% implicitly link blacks with negative traits (evil, failure)” (Begley 2004, p. 1).

## CHANGING ATTITUDES

Do we have the ability to change our attitudes and behaviors? Gladwell explains the two levels of consciousness in a manner that gives us hope. He says that in many situations, we are able to direct our behavior using our conscious attitudes — what we choose to believe or our stated values — rather than our “racial attitude on an *unconscious* level — the immediate, automatic associations that tumble out before we’ve even had time to think” (2005, p. 84). He continues, “We don’t deliberately choose our unconscious attitudes. . . we may not even be aware of them” (p. 85). Because our unconscious attitudes may be completely incompatible with our stated values, we must know just what those unconscious attitudes are, for they are, as Gladwell states, a powerful predictor of how we may act in some spontaneous situations.

Gladwell describes the type of circumstances where blacks and whites will both engage and disengage around climate and personal relation issues:

If you have a strongly pro-white pattern of associations. . . there is evidence that that will affect the way you behave in the presence of a black person. . . . In all likelihood, you won’t be aware that you are behaving any differently than you would around a white person. But chances are you’ll lean forward a little less, turn away slightly from him or her, close your body a bit, be a bit less expressive, maintain less eye contact, stand a little farther away, smile a lot less, hesitate and stumble over your words a bit more, laugh at jokes a bit less. Does that matter? Of course it does. (pp. 85-86)

Gladwell goes on to describe the possible repercussions of these unconscious biases at a job interview. The same factors may affect behaviors in parent-teacher conferences or affect student outcomes in classrooms.

Another study describes matching whites with blacks for the completion of a task (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005). Whites were first divided into two groups: those who expressed egalitarian views and those who expressed their biases openly. These individuals were then observed to see if their actions, such as those described by Gladwell, showed unconscious biases. Each white person then engaged in a problem-solving task with a black person. The time it took to complete the joint task was recorded (see Table 1).

Two important points bear emphasis here. First, the African-American individuals, either consciously or unconsciously, were aware of the behavior that showed bias. In this study, “blacks’ impressions of whites were related mainly to whites’ unconscious attitudes. . . the uncomfortable and discriminatory be-

**TABLE 1.**  
**Biased and Unbiased White Individuals’**  
**Time to Complete Paired Task**

White Member of Pair	Time to Complete Task with a Black Person
Unbiased in word and behavior	4 minutes
Biased in word and behavior	5 minutes
Unbiased by self-report, behavior shows bias	6 minutes

havior associated with aversive racism is very obvious to blacks, even while whites either don’t recognize it or consider it hidden” (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005, pp. 3-4). I know that as an African American, when I enter a room of white people, I pick up subtle clues, either consciously or unconsciously, as to who is a good, open contact for me versus someone who may have difficulty engaging with me easily based on my race.

Second, white individuals who said they were unbiased, yet showed nonverbal biased behavior, reported their impressions of their behavior related to their *publicly expressed* attitudes and were likely to maintain their stated level of biases when questioned. Therefore, they are likely to blame *the victim*, the black individual, for their slowness in completing the task (and incidentally, possibly reinforce their stereotypes). Sleeter contends, “We cling to filters that

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screen out what people of color try to tell us because we fear losing material and psychological advantages that we enjoy” (1994, p. 6).

We are far better off to acknowledge our possible biases and to try to work together openly with that knowledge.

It is important to note that the *well-intentioned* are still racist:

Because aversive racists may not be aware of their unconscious negative attitudes and only discriminate against blacks when they can justify their behavior on the basis of some factor other than race, they will commonly deny any intentional wrongdoing when confronted with evidence of their biases. Indeed, they do not discriminate intentionally. (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005, p. 5)

For example, if white individuals who are self-deceived about their own biases were sitting in a position to influence a promotion decision, they might not support the advancement of a “difficult” black individual and would select another factor as a reason for their action, rather than see or acknowledge their own conflicted perceptions.

This study on task completion strongly suggests that we are far better off to acknowledge our possible biases and to try to work together openly with that knowledge. If we mask our true attitudes, sometimes invisible to our own selves, we will continue to work slowly or unproductively. Consider the white individ-

uals whose conflict over their true or hidden selves and their outward statements made a simple task both time-consuming and psychologically difficult for both the black individuals and themselves (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005).

Unintentional racism is not always determined by whether an individual possesses prejudiced beliefs or attitudes, and it can take many different forms. These forms include the unconscious gestures mentioned before or “the dominant norms and standards.”

Because many people believe these norms and standards are culturally neutral and universally right, true, and good, they do not understand how these norms and standards oppress others. They are not even aware of this possibility — and, in this sense, such racism is unintentional. (Applebaum 1997, p. 409)

## HARD WORK OF HONESTY

Unpacking our levels of consciousness and intent requires hard work. First, there needs to be unswerving, unnerving, scrupulous honesty. Individuals need to become less focused on feeling very tolerant and good about themselves and more focused on examining their own biases. One must realize and accept that the foundation and continuation of a bias may have, at its root, personal and group gain.

I recall sharing with my graduate and undergraduate students that true equity will be reached when 40% of all service people. . . meaning hotel housekeepers, groundskeepers, etc., are white men. The loss from 80% of the managerial jobs in this country to 40%, their proportion of the population, would be an actual loss in the number of jobs currently *allotted* to

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### Dovidio and Gaertner offer some suggestions for action:

- When a person of color brings up race as an issue — listen deeply!
- If the person indicates that he or she is offended, don't be defensive.
- Do not begin talking quickly.
- Do not explain why they are misinterpreting the situation.
- Do not begin crying. (These are some of the most infuriating responses people of color encounter when they challenge a situation that feels wrong.)
- If you hear about something third-hand, don't get angry. Remember that it is almost never completely safe for a person of color to challenge a dominant perception.

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**Source:** Dovidio, Jack F., and Sam L. Gaertner. “Color Blind or Just Plain Blind.” *Nonprofit Quarterly* (Winter 2005): 5.

them based on race and gender. That is, they would not have the jobs they may perceive as expected and modeled as their right in the workplace. Can we all embrace such a future? Delpit maintains, "Liberal educators believe themselves to be operating with good intentions, but these good intentions are only con-

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scious delusions about their unconscious true motives" (Delpit 1988, p. 285). I am not quite that cynical. I believe in change, slow as it may be.

Finally, Teaching Tolerance, a group dedicated to reducing prejudice, improving intergroup relations, and supporting equitable school experiences for our nation's children, says, "We would like to believe that when a person has a conscious commitment to change, the very act of discovering one's hidden biases can propel one to act to correct for it. It may not be possible to avoid the automatic stereotype or prejudice, but it is certainly possible to consciously rectify it" (2001, p. 4). Otherwise, we are all at the mercy of a blink of the eye. **K**

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