

# Police officers can learn to manage their prejudices

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**M**any communities are trying to come to terms with the deaths of African-American males, ranging from a 12-year-old child to grown men, at the hands of police officers. Some of these incidents were complicated situations with multiple causes, however, it is almost a certainty that unconscious racial bias played a role.

The New York Times recently published an interview with Jennifer Eberhardt, recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant. Her research into unconscious racial bias showed that criminal defendants with stronger African facial features were more likely to receive a death penalty. In a second study, research subjects unconsciously exposed to African faces on a computer more quickly identified a blurry object as a gun, than if they had been exposed to white faces. This suggests a tendency for people to see African faces as "bad" and "violent."

The Implicit Association Test, developed by researchers at Harvard University, the University of Virginia and the University of Washington, measures unconscious preference for white Americans over black Americans. Brian Nosek and his colleagues found that more than 70 percent of the more than 1 million individuals who have completed the test show an implicit preference for white Americans, even when the subjects do not consciously recognize that preference. People who work in the criminal justice system are no more or less prejudiced than anyone else, but the results of their unconscious biases are particularly unjust and tragic.

Unconscious bias is closely related to the many stereotypes that are widely shared: one group might be associated with street crime; another with stealing money on Wall Street; a third with alcoholism. If you meet someone who fits the stereotype, it is easy to think, "Aha! See, they really are that way." In my classes on "Managing Your Prejudices," I teach that stereotypes are true of some people within a group and untrue of others in the same group.

Every human being has automatic thoughts and feelings about others based on race, ethnicity, physical presentation (body weight, dress, tattoos, piercings, hair, accents, etc.) My goal is for people to recognize their tendency to think "those people" are all the same, and to remind themselves that it's not true. Those people are not all the same. Each is a unique individual.

One stereotype I know that I have — one that automatically pops into my head — is that men with multiple tattoos commit domestic violence. I am NOT saying this is true or even that I believe it. I am saying that it automatically comes into my mind, perhaps because of a movie I saw or something I was told as a child.

As a culturally competent person, my job is to recognize the thought and to interact with each person as a unique individual, regardless of the wayward thoughts I experience. Police officers have seconds to respond to potentially dangerous situations, and they should have a clear mind that is not cluttered by unconscious biases. They can be trained to acknowledge and manage their prejudices and not act upon them.

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