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On race, culture, and community.

by Mikhail Lyubansky, Ph.D.

Studies of Unconscious Bias Suggest Racism Not Necessarily Perpetrated by Racists

Most racism today is done by those who vow they are not racist.

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NEW ORLEANS—W.K. Kellogg's (WKKF) 2012 conference kicked off with what is now familiar news regarding racial inequity: Racial inequity exists, and it's not decreasing. In the conference's first plenary session titled "Unconscious Bias and Race," Dr. David Williams, professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, cited studies documenting that when Latinos and African Americans were treated by physicians for a broken bone in their leg, they received pain medication significantly less often than white patients with the same injury.



Photo by Danielle Miles: Moderator Maria Hinojosa (center) with panelists Williams, Godsil, Goff and powell

*Moderator Maria Hinojosa (center) with panelists David Williams, Rachel Godsil, Phillip Goff and john powell (from left to right).

The data were not new. They came from a 2002 Institute of Medicine report on racial and ethnic disparities in health care, which stressed that “a large body of research underscores the existence of disparities.” As examples, the report stated

... minorities are less likely to be given appropriate cardiac medications or to undergo bypass surgery, and are less likely to receive kidney dialysis or transplants. By contrast, they are more likely to receive certain less-desirable procedures, such as lower limb amputations for diabetes and other conditions.

The data beg an obvious question, and Williams did not disappoint. “How on earth do we make sense of this?” he asked. “How is it possible that for the best trained medical workforce in the world to produce... care that appears to be so discriminatory?”

The answer, Williams argued, is unconscious discrimination. According to Williams, the research shows that when people hold a negative stereotype about a group and meet someone from that group, they often treat that person differently and honestly don't even realize it. Williams noted that most Americans would object to being labeled as “racist” or even as “discriminating”, but he added, “Welcome to the human race. It is a normal process about how all of us process information. The problem for our society is that the level of negative stereotypes is very high.”

Understanding the power of unconscious bias has emerged as a new mission for leaders and advocates working to bring racial healing and racial equity to communities across the U.S.

Dr. Gail Christopher, vice president for program strategy at the Kellogg Foundation, explained that centuries of a racial hierarchy in America has left its mark on our society, especially pertaining to how people of color are perceived by whites. “Our society assigns value to groups of people,” she said. “It is a process that is embedded in the consciousness of Americans and impacted by centuries of bias.”

Of course, doctors are not the only ones who express unconscious racial bias. Dr. Phillip Goff, assistant psychology professor at UCLA, showed examples of how law enforcement officials can be influenced by unconscious bias not only when it comes to race, but also in regard to what they perceive to be threats to their masculinity. Over 80% of incidents that involved police use of deadly force were preceded by threat to the officers' masculinity. “'Fag' is a deadly word,” Goff observed. In fact, Goff's research suggests that threats to masculinity were much more predictive of deadly use of force (in highly realistic simulation exercises) than explicit measures of racial prejudice. Racism, it turns out, is not necessarily perpetrated by racists but by people who feel threatened for other reasons and are not aware of their racial bias.

Here's Goff revealing one of social scientists' "dirty little secrets": <http://www.youtube.com/embed/V1f0BdZv7zI#!>

Goff's findings may allow us to reconcile the existence of racial inequity on a variety of different indexes with the increasingly popular rhetoric that racism no longer exists.

“That is an illusion,” said Rachel Godsil, the director of research for the American Values Institute.

The last panelist, John Powell, director of the Haas Center for Diversity and Inclusion and Robert D. Haas Chancellor's Chair in Equity and Inclusion at the University of California Berkeley, elaborated. "The fact that we have these deep, unconscious biases – and it's conflicted around race ... we can be primed to be racially fair, we can be primed to be racially anxious – and it doesn't make us a racist. It makes us human. And if we're going to address it, we have to acknowledge that."

"There are three types of not knowing," Powell explained: 1. What we can't know, like how many neurons are firing at any given moment, 2. What we don't care to know, like the color of the car we pass at a particular intersection, and 3. What we don't want to know. When we talk about racism, we usually talk about #2 and #3, and those are important conversations to be having. We all need to care. We all need to want to know. But #1 is important as well.

Indeed, unless we intentionally go out of our way to learn about and become aware of our own bias, it is likely to spill out at the most inopportune time, like during a stressful traffic stop (in the case of a law enforcement officer) or during a medical emergency in the ER. As Powell observed, "when there's tension between conscious and unconscious drives, the unconscious usually wins."

The good news is that it doesn't have to. We just have to learn to become aware and be willing to acknowledge our own biases and then consciously override them. Denial and professed racial color-blindness only makes things worse.

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