

Diversity Team Article

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When I first learned about the concept of implicit bias it was via a “Ted Talk” on YouTube. It was then reinforced in a conversation with my husband, Tim, as he too was learning more about this concept, through his work at APPLE. I was very interested in learning more. My studies have lead me to this understanding about:

“Unexamined Behavior”

First, let’s try this exercise together.....Don’t be in a hurry to read this:

Close your eyes and take 2 rather deep breaths.

Now, I would like you to visualize the following:

The police officer that just stopped you for speeding.

The nurse caring for you in the hospital.

An elementary school teacher

A referee in professional football

A couple in the park with their child

Our brain creates images of what is familiar to us.

What was your image of the officer, the nurse, the teacher, the referee, the couple, and the child?

What was the: sex, ethnicity, color, age, sexual orientation, and the ability level of each person?

Now, let’s explore some anatomy of the brain that will help us in understanding our responses.

When confronted with something unfamiliar, the most ancient part of our brain goes immediately into gear. Since the beginning of time, it is the instinctive response that has kept us alive. It is not controlled by reasoning. It happens within 1 to 2 seconds! In emergencies, it has saved our lives.

This is the process:

The amygdala stimulates the hypothalamus

The hypothalamus accesses the hypothalamic pituitary

The hypothalamic pituitary contacts the adrenal gland

The adrenal gland releases Cortisol.....our STRESS hormone!

Our flight or fight response has just occurred in 1-2 seconds.

So...Our heart rate will increase

We start to sweat

Our blood pressure increases.....

All because we came in contact with something unfamiliar to us.

Now, there is a new part of our brain in town! It is our prefrontal cortex (in the forehead area of the brain) and it has evolved over the centuries so that we are able to increase our ability to process or “think” through our experiences, not just instinctually react.

This increased ability to process/think, is a consciousness that increases our ability to turn the unexpected into expected.

We are most comfortable and happy when are around people who look like us and act like us. That is what is called implicit bias.

“Thoughts and feelings are “implicit” if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature. We have a bias when, rather than being neutral, we have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people. Thus, we use the term “implicit bias” to describe when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.”

If you were to be in an unfamiliar social system (something that is not within your normal social setting), you would become stressed due to the fight or flight response. Your pulse will increase, your blood pressure will rise, and you will start to feel warm or start perspiring. So, how you would manage or cope with that stress response?

It would be to utilize your evolved thinking process; accessing your ability to think through or discern other observable information about the new social setting or you may remember learned information about this new social setting.

This advanced thinking/processing ability will relieve your stress response and turn that stressful social moment into a learning experience or a new social understanding.

To examine our behavior, we need to start to examine our behavior when we are in a new setting with those who may not look like us or act like us.

“Unexamined behavior is our biggest stumbling block to achieving true equality.” Unexamined behavior allows us to believe we are treating everyone equally, when in reality, we are not.

As we are able to learn develop and deepen our understanding of community life in its’ new expressions within our culture and in the cultures of others; those visualizations of the police, the nurse, the teacher, the professional football referee, the couple with a child...will all change.

Just learning what we have read here, will change your visualization of those people.

How do we change our unconsciousness into a consciousness?

There is an opportunity to accomplish this when we turn the unexpected into the expected.

1. Visualize situations before they take shape...

The policeman stopping me may be a woman of another culture.

The nurse helping me in the hospital may be an older man.

The elementary teacher may be a disabled veteran.

The referee for the professional football league may be a woman.

The couple in the park with a child may be a gay couple.

2. When coming into the unexpected. Foster your courage and examine your own behavior and ask yourself, “Is this how I would handle this situation...if this person looked like me? Believed like me?”

3. Open yourself to different possibilities. Expose yourself and your family to those things which, for you, are currently unexpected. Normalize the unexpected. For example, we now have 2 generations that have been able to see a black man as President of the US.

I am hopeful this has given us all, a moment to reconsider our unconscious participation in the inequalities of life around us.

