

How Mindfulness Can Defeat Racial Bias

by Rhonda Magee

This article is the third in a series exploring the effects that unconscious racial biases have on the criminal justice system in the United States.

Officer Tina Latendresse of the Hillsboro Police Department in Oregon meditates during a mindfulness training program for police. Benjamin Brink/The Oregonian

When I was promoted to tenured full professor, the dean of my law school kindly had flowers sent to me at my home in Pacific Heights, an overpriced San Francisco neighborhood almost devoid of black residents. I opened the door to find a tall, young, African-American deliveryman who announced, “Delivery for Professor Magee.” I, a petite black woman, dressed for a simple Saturday spent in my own home, reached for the flowers saying, “I am Professor Magee.”

The deliveryman looked down at the order and back up at me. Apparently shaken from the hidden ground of his preconceptions, he looked at me again. Incredulous, he asked, “Are you sure?”

Let me be clear. I’ll never know what exactly it was that caused the deliveryman to conclude, on seeing me, that I must not actually be the person to whom the flowers were to be delivered. I am not privy to what was going on inside his head. But it seems inescapable that his confusion had something to do with features of my social identity that had, for him, been coded instantly, if not unconsciously, as inconsistent with the identity of “professor” and “resident” of a home in an upscale neighborhood.

We are each reminded almost daily of the way that race intersects with judgment in our daily lives, leading to bad decisions and over-reactions—which in the context of criminal justice can have deadly consequences. As the story of my encounter with the black deliveryman indicates, none of us is immune: Black people may be as conditioned as anyone else by stereotypes and unconscious expectations.

Is there a solution? Research shows that mindfulness practices help us focus, give us greater control over our emotions, and increase our capacity to think clearly and act with purpose. Might mindfulness assist police and other public servants in minimizing the mistaken judgments that lead to such harms? Might they help the rest of us—professors and deliverymen alike—minimize our biases as well?

In a word, yes. The good news is that mindfulness and related practices do assist in increasing focus and raising awareness, and have been shown to assist in minimizing bias. While the research is ongoing, studies are beginning to show that mindfulness meditation

and compassion practices serve as potent aids in the work of decreasing bias.

When we consider these new findings along with some of the already proven benefits of mindfulness, and combine them with teachings about contemporary forms of racism, the outlines of an effective set of new mindfulness-based interventions—for police, doctors, educators, and the full range of others—have already begun to emerge. I call these Mindfulness-Based ColorInsight Practices.

ColorInsight Practices

Rhonda Magee has adapted contemplative practices to cultivate awareness of bias. Here are some examples of her work to date.

“I See You”

1. In a circle, look into the faces and eyes of everyone in the room.
2. Offer one another a smile or gently attending gaze.
3. In this way, we begin to live our intention of being with others respectfully and of giving everyone our attention.

“Just like me”

1. Students are paired and asked to look into one another’s eyes as the instructor intones a series of phrases which underscore the similarity that exists across, or in spite of, any apparent or presumed differences.
2. Settle in, bring your awareness to your breath and to your body sitting, and gently take in the person sitting before you. Notice any tendency to look away.
3. Now consider that the person before you has known love. Inwardly recite the phrase “Just like me, this person has loved, and has been loved.” And, “Just like me, this person has known pain and loss.”
4. This practice aims to dissolve the sense of social distance that may exist as part of the “story” of our racialized differences.

Insight Dialogue

1. Simply sit, bring awareness to breath, and notice any sounds that occur. We label them as sound, noticing perhaps when they arise and fall away, and any impact on the body, or tendency to go into a story about what the sound represents.
3. By developing this capacity to hear sound with less judgment, we enhance our capacity to hear words with an ear for the multi-dimensionality of the messages they convey.
4. Pause, allow thoughts to settle and open to the wisdom and honest truth that might support deepening connection, while trusting in the process of bringing awareness into the experience of being with another. Only then do we speak.
5. The listener settles into presence, creating a safe container in which the truth may be spoken. The speaker listens not merely for the words spoken, but also for the body

language through which deep meaning is often conveyed.

“MLK’s Equanimity”

1. The practice is suggested by Arthur Zajonc in his book, *Meditation as Contemplative Inquiry*, and it asks participants to reflect on the story of how Martin Luther King, Jr., quelled a crowd intent on revenge.
2. Invite participants to think of a situation in which they are feeling rage, and to access a higher self that might assist them in seeing both (or more) sides of the dispute from the vantage point of the whole.
3. Discuss, first in dyads and then in a large group, what insights arose in that inquiry.

It might sound counterintuitive to some, but both insight and analysis suggests that implicit bias may actually be heightened by the societal emphasis on colorblindness, a notion that dates at least to the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in the late 19th century (Justice Harlan, dissenting), and played an important role in the civil rights movement of the mid-20th.

When embraced by conservatives in the late 20th century, however, it became a basis for largely shutting down effective understanding of race and its impact in our lives.

As most of us know from simple, everyday experience, none of us is actually blind to race or color. In fact, research confirms common disconnects between explicit and implicit cognition around race and color. Even if we try to act adopt a colorblind view in the world, it doesn’t work because our brains don’t actually work that way.

Indeed, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dissonance results from implicit and explicit efforts to comply with social norms against recognizing race and color. Despite professing to be more or less colorblind, social psychologists have found that when confronted with a racial Other, anxieties cause us to, for example, arrange seats farther apart than we might otherwise, to over-anticipate disagreement and conflict, to avoid potentially charged topics that actually lead to enhanced understanding. Professing to be colorblind amidst all such evidence to the contrary has been deemed by some to be a new form of racism—colorblind racism.

Obviously, we need a new way of dealing with these dynamics in our lives. What, if anything, might we do to help minimize with these pervasive reactions?

How to minimize bias

Enter mindfulness. A decade of research indicates that mindfulness and compassion practices assist in raising awareness of our emotions and sensations in a given moment, regulating emotional responses and specifically reducing anxiety, increasing empathy and perspective-taking, and increasing overall gratitude and well-being. This all suggests that mindfulness and compassion practices may be important to creating the general conditions that support minimizing bias.

For example, a recent study found that compassion practice, specifically a traditional meditation known as “lovingkindness practice,” increased the sense of wellbeing among students and thus led to more effective learning in a classroom environment. Further, one study suggested that even a 10-minute mindfulness practice reduced race and age bias

on the Implicit Attitude Test, possibly by reducing participants' tendencies to automatically activate associations.

And where such bias may exist, studies have shown that performance may suffer. Here again, mindfulness may assist—in this case, by supporting those vulnerable to having their performance negatively impacted by the threat of confirming a stereotype during a given exercise, providing protection against this so called “stereotype threat.” In another study, a mere five-minute practice session appeared to reverse the impact of stereotype threat and prevent lower performance when compared to what would have otherwise occurred to students facing such threats in a classroom environment.

Introducing “ColorInsight”

In my own work, I identify, develop and examine the efficacy of a set of practices that intentionally link inner and outer work to raise awareness about race and racial experience in our lives, with a focus on personal, interpersonal, and systemic or structural levels.

The resulting “ColorInsight Practices ” combine mindfulness-based practices with teaching and learning about race and color to increase awareness of how race and color impact us all, and give rise to insight and greater understanding. They pave the way to new experiences that help us loosen our attachments to narratives and other forms of suffering that give rise to biases along the way.

By identifying and creating personal, interpersonal and systemic teachings and practices which increase and deepen experiences of interconnection across lines of real and perceived difference, Mindfulness-Based ColorInsight Practice increases our actual capacities not only for acting in less biased ways, but also for making more authentic, positive and effective cross-race relationships in these re-segregated times.

While still under construction, the approach so far combines teaching and learning about race (including whiteness), bias, privilege and historical conditions that have contributed to their ongoing operation in our lives with regular experiential practices for opening awareness and increasing capacity for new ways of being with and minimizing racism and color-related suffering. Such practices include sitting with awareness, compassion, self-compassion and lovingkindness practices, mindful communication practice, narrative practices, circle practice, vows practices, and more, some of which are described in the sidebars that accompany this piece.

Practices such as these should become a part of basic mindfulness practice for each of us, to help each of us work more effectively with others in increasingly diverse and conflict-laden environments. They create pathways—neural, emotional, and relational—to engagements that promote not merely personal, but relational and systemic changes that support real social justice.

While more research is needed, studies show that our conscious, explicit beliefs about race and color are only part of the story about how these social facts impact our everyday lives and life chances.

Fortunately, mindfulness practices actually do help in the fight against implicit bias and its capacity to cause explicit suffering in our lives. While they won't end racism, mindfulness and other contemplative practices do support ways of being in the world that reflect less of the biases that each of us holds, whether we are deliverymen, students, teachers—or

men and women with badges, authorized to shoot to kill.

And that is truly good news.

To learn more about ColorInsight and Rhonda Magee's journey join an Awakin Call with her this Saturday, January 7th 9AM-10:30AM PST. Details and RSVP info [here](#).