

Self-Awareness and Cultural Identity: A Medical School Course of Exploration into Personal Unconscious Bias



The U.S. continues to struggle with race, and this struggle plays out in our scientific culture as well as in the rest of society. A course offered at Harvard Medical School tries to help participants recognize the manifestations of racism in their own beliefs and behaviors.

Where Are the Minority Job Applicants?

Those of us involved in faculty recruitment are only too aware that although we dutifully add the language to job descriptions urging applications from underrepresented minorities, we are often unable to find “qualified” applicants of the same caliber as majority scientists. Why are there no candidates?

The answer is that the U.S. has a long history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and anti-miscegenation laws that has shaped our perceptions. And even today there are innumerable institutional structures that continue to offer privilege and advantage to whites. We are bombarded from birth with images and stories depicting black people as criminals, shiftless and lazy, oversexed and dangerous. Most white Americans spend their time in predominantly white contexts and feel uncomfortable when they find themselves in the minority in a black group. Although there are outstanding resources that debunk race as a biological reality, we have trouble seeing that race is a social construct. And it can be hard for white Americans to appreciate how the three levels of racism—internalized, interpersonal, and institutional—continue to deny blacks access to the benefits of society that whites enjoy.

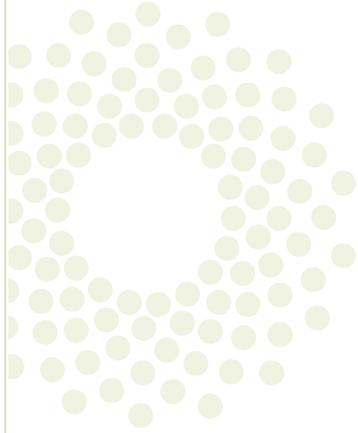
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Learning How We Experience Race

Another manifestation of racism is disparities in health care. Such disparities are so well documented that the Liaison Committee on Medical Education of the Association of American Medical Colleges has added a requirement for “cultural competence training” in medical school curricula. We have developed a course at Harvard Medical School designed to launch participants on a path of self-reflection and exploration of their own unconscious biases. The elective course has 14 sessions, each two hours. It is offered twice a year, once to students in any year of their training, and once to faculty. While the study of racism forms a core component of our work, the course also explores gender bias, homophobia, social class, immigration, religion, and body image.

The core tenet of the program is that undoing racism starts with each person understanding what and how s/he was taught to think about and experience race, as a key to unlocking unconscious feelings and biases. Therefore, the class is structured to allow participants to explore the values they have about human differences and how they acquired those values.

We begin by having the group attempt to define “culture.” We ask each person to identify his or her cultural identity. Participants bring a “cultural object” (photograph, icon, food, book, etc.) to class that has special importance for them. Each person presents the object and its meaning to the group. And as the circle completes, what emerges is a remarkable richness in self-identities. Students often find



it hard to select just one object, because we all belong to multiple cultures, and a discussion about which objects were *not* chosen often brings additional richness to the conversation.

In a subsequent session we each construct our “cultural genogram”: a family tree going back as many generations as desired, using symbols and color coding to denote interracial and interclass marriages; levels of education achieved; immigration patterns; gay and lesbian; disabled and mentally ill; divorce and illegitimacy; and class status.¹ In groups of three we present our genograms to each other, noting areas of pride and shame in the family, unspoken rules, and power dynamics. (What topics were *never* discussed at the dining room table?) As we hear each other’s stories, it becomes clear that we have shared experience with some human differences, while other experiences are totally foreign and unknown to some.

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Finding Our Blind Spots

These discussions focus on uncovering our “blind spots,” areas of privilege that each of us has that we don’t have to acknowledge. For example, as a white male, I rarely have to think about my race. Race is something that others have. I am the “norm” in my society, and thus race has very little impact on me on a daily basis. I was raised in a white community, went to a white school, and had little exposure to blacks. But I find out in this course that my black colleague thinks about race 10–20 times a day and experiences daily “micro-aggressions”: clutching of handbags as he walks by white women, being followed in department stores while he is shopping, experiencing lack of eye contact from whites, hearing comments such as “My, you are so articulate!” or “What do black people think about that?”

Referring to our cultural genograms, in subsequent sessions we explore the communities in which we grew up, our schools, summer vacations, and circles of friends. Again we do this with an eye to understanding how we were taught values about human differences. Who was in our world and who was not? We approach each of the “isms” in the same way, sometimes using trigger videotapes to spark discussion. For example, what would it be like

to grow up gay, to have a secret that you could not tell anyone, for fear that he or she would not love you anymore?² One rough estimate is that about 10% of us are gay. Yet of the 20 or so people in your genogram, how many did you know were gay? How does that enter

into your current comfort zone about being around gay people? Another example: As you move around in your busy day, how often do you notice how difficult it might be to follow you in a wheelchair? What feelings come up for you when you encounter a person in a wheelchair? Do you relate to that individual as you would anyone else?

Which Box Are You In?

Racism is like smog: It is inescapably in the air everywhere. We breathe it from the day we are born, only occasionally noticing it. We may cough from time to time and produce a most ugly excrescence, wondering how something like that could have

emerged from such a nice person. We try to hide these contributions, because we fear being called racist. We want to believe we are not racist. I was given a lovely instrument by Beverly Daniel Tatum that helps get folks thinking about their racism in a constructive way. Consider the following table:

	Active	Passive
Racist		
Anti-racist		

Who would you put in each box? It is usually possible to come up with examples of people who are actively racist, both now and historically. Similarly, it is straightforward to identify active anti-racists, people who devote unusual energy and time to fight racism. With additional thought, you might imagine a passive racist, someone who harbors considerable racist attitudes but who may be relatively unaware of this trait. Where would *you* be? Most whites would like to be in the lower-right box: passive anti-racist. Here, we can be truly against racism, but we are not prepared to do any hard work.

What Tatum taught me is that in reality the passive anti-racist box does not exist. If you are white, you carry white privilege. If you simply

accept that reality without questioning it, then you are part of the problem. You are passively endorsing the continuation of a racist society, enjoying your privilege, seeing it as “normal” or “the way things are,” or even denying that you have any special privilege because you are white. You may believe that we live in a meritocracy and that you have achieved all your successes solely because you are smart and have worked very hard. But, white individuals are born on third base, even if we want to believe we hit a triple.

Accepting Reality

In *The Matrix*, Deo is given the choice of the red or blue pill by Morpheus. Take the blue pill: Go back to the status quo, change nothing, and continue to wonder why there are few competitive black candidates in our job searches. Take the red pill: Accept the reality and unfairness of racism, accept the nonexistence of passive anti-racism, and accept that we are all trained since birth to participate in a society with multiple institutional structures that ensure the preservation of white privilege. Having taken the red pill, there is no going back. ■

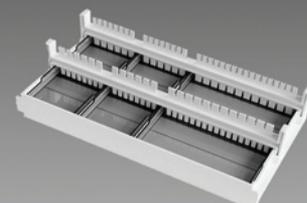
—Daniel A. Goodenough, Harvard Medical School

References

¹Hardy KV, Laszloffy TA. (1995). The cultural genogram: key to training culturally competent family therapists. *J Marital Fam Ther* 21:227–237.

²McNaught B. (1993). *Growing Up Gay and Lesbian*. DVD, VHS. www.brian-mcnaught.com/books/growingupgay.htm.

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Kyoto International Conference Hall, Kyoto, Japan

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Important Deadlines:

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Travel Award: Wednesday, July 8

Registration: Thursday, August 20

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