Racial Bias

Racial bias is everywhere but we may not always see it. However, understanding the way people feel about and behave toward those outside their own group can help communities heal after a tragedy, as well as prevent future ones, according to Yale University psychologist John Dovidio, PhD

Understanding our own racial biases is something we all struggle with, even when we aren’t aware of those struggles. psychologist who has been studying a more modern form of prejudice and says ridding ourselves of those biases is practically impossible. But being aware of them is the first step toward improving relations among different racial groups.

 We used to think about racism in a very simple way – that people had negative thoughts, negative feelings, hatred toward a group. But since the 1960s when there was civil rights legislation, it changed the way we thought about race because it was not only immoral to think that way, but it was illegal to discriminate. And what i think is that racism has become more subtle since then. That people still have negative feelings, but they may not be aware of those negative feelings. Instead of feelings of hatred, it’s more like feelings of avoidance and discomfort. That’s where the name aversive racism comes from.

the biggest challenge because most of us are really well practiced at convincing ourselves that we’re not prejudiced. So, most of us want to be good people. Prejudice is bad and when we think about it, we always do the right thing.

One of the consequences of aversive racism or unconscious bias is that you don’t discriminate in a situation where what’s right and wrong are clearly defined because you know what you’re supposed to do when you do it. But it usually happens when you can justify a response on the basis of some factor other than race. So, there may be like two people that you are interviewing – one white and one black – and you shift your criteria for the job in a way that actually favors the white person without actually directly discriminating against it.

So the problem is every time we look at our behavior and monitor our behavior, we behave in an egalitarian way. And it’s only when we’re not paying attention that we discriminate. So to your question, what we have to do is probably – if something’s unconscious, you don’t know you have it. It’s that simple. So you can’t think about what you’re really feeling. What you have to do is assume you probably have these biases if you’re an average American.

And then what you have to do is try to control those biases in the way you behave towards people. You often have to acknowledge you may have these biases. So, it’s an ongoing battle because you can’t really get rid of these. They’re like having habits of mind that you’ve grown up with. And so you just have to work at being always alert, always conscious and always receptive to the possibility that we might be biased.

One of the problems with aversive racism that I mentioned before is that you actually avoid the group and you avoid the group because they make you uncomfortable and you can, therefore, maintain the stereotypes of the group. If you have a lot of interaction with members of the group, then you no longer think about people as being a member of that group, primarily. You think about them as individuals. And so, you haven’t really gotten rid of the implicit bias, but you’ve been able to fine tune the way you interact with many people. You justdial up a broader array of repertoire of being able to interact with people and understand them.

There’s been some amazing changes in terms of attitudes since since obama became president, but there’s also been a real persistence of racism. In terms of changing of attitudes, it probably has happened among the black community because they’re new role models. Blacks can envision a new future. Blacks can be at the center rather than a periphery. Many of the issues that you saw with Obama in terms of objections to him, questions about where he was born, is a reflection of aversive racism, where a black person in that position of power can’t be legitimate in that position of power. And so you look for reasons to try to devalue or get rid of that person.

The other thing is that many of his policies have been opposed in ways that are much more virulent than many other presidents. And I think it’s in part because those negative racial attitudes get expressed, get channeled in a way that has a higher intensity.

The research on police officers – in general, they started doing some research with different computer simulation games where you would shoot or not shoot somebody that appeared on a screen. And that person either had a gun or had an object like a wallet. And then you would have to make a decision do you shoot or not shoot that person. And what that research found was two things. One was that people were much more likely to shoot an unarmed black person than an unarmed white person. And second of all, implicit bias predicted that result. On average, there’s shooter bias, and the shooter bias is related to implicit attitudes. And work with police officers show the same bias and that it is related to their implicit attitudes as well. And the more they are exposed in their daily activity to black violence, the police officers, the more likely they are to show this kind of bias. So, what it talks about is nobody wants to shoot an unarmed person. That’s not their intentions. But what it shows is if you have these very quick associations of blacks with crime and violence, even if you’re well trained in your profession, it makes you susceptible to making a split-second decision that you can never take back.