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Overcoming Implicit Bias and Racial Anxiety

Fighting subconscious bias takes effort—but it can be done.

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By **Linda R. Tropp** and **Rachel D. Godsil**

*This is the fourth of a four-part series exploring how racial bias and prejudice continue to have a negative impact in America, despite Americans' widespread rejection of racist ideologies. It draws extensively from our volume, *The Science of Equality: Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Healthcare*. This part explores how individuals and institutions can reduce bias and mitigate implicit racism.*

So far, we've examined how implicit cognitive processes can unintentionally end up reproducing racially unequal outcomes, even in such "helping" fields as education and health care (let alone professions such as law enforcement, which can be more contentious or adversarial). The question now is what, if anything, we can do to reduce or eliminate these patterns. Fortunately, there is an emerging body of psychological research on this topic. This work provides some well-founded ideas about how to reduce bias, calm racial anxieties, decrease the effects of the stereotype threat, and improve overall interracial interactions.

Social scientists seeking to address the effects of racial bias look to two broad categories of intervention: efforts to reduce bias and efforts to mitigate the effects of any remaining bias. Simply making people aware that they have the potential to be biased is not enough; people require specific and tailored forms of intervention.

The nature and pervasiveness of implicit bias is now well-established, so social scientists are focusing increasingly on efforts to reduce it. Several practices have emerged that have shown promise—and researchers now are trying to combine these into a set of practices to "break the prejudice habit," as [Patricia Devine](#) and her colleagues have called it. These practices include:

- Exposing people to counter-stereotypic examples of group members. In one experiment, for example, people showed measurably less implicit bias toward Asian Americans after they watched *The Joy Luck Club*, a movie about Asian immigrants to the United States.
- Consciously contrasting negative stereotypes with specific counter-examples. For example, suppose you hear or think of a negative stereotype about African Americans. You can compare that stereotype to what you know about a friend or famous person such as Oprah Winfrey or President Obama.
- Rather than aim to be color-blind, the goal should be to "individuate" by seeking specific information about members of other racial groups. This individuation allows you to recognize people based upon their own personal attributes rather than stereotypes about their racial or ethnic group.
- Another tactic is to assume the perspective of an outgroup member. By asking yourself what your perspective might be if you were in the other's situation you can develop a better appreciation for what their concerns are.
- Making more of an effort to encounter and engage in positive interactions with members of other racial and ethnic groups. Put simply, the more time spent enjoying the company of members of other racial groups, the more that racial anxiety and stereotyping seem to dissipate.

we are of our own objectivity, the more likely bias is to creep in. (Think of those senior law-firm attorneys who no doubt imagined they were objectively rating the associates' work—and yet gave the exact same memorandum significantly different evaluations based on the author's presumed race.) Developing a little humility about how much we know can be a good step toward real impartiality.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the best ways of reducing racial anxiety is by having [friends or colleagues](#) of another racial group. Mere contact between group members isn't enough; what's important is meaningful, ongoing relations. Places where members of different racial groups interact cooperatively and meet as equals—such as in [sports teams](#) and the military—are particularly good at breaking down implicit racism. Trust and rapport between racial groups are harder to build in racially homogenous environments. This is a particular challenge in educational settings, given the continued (and growing) prevalence of racial segregation in K-12 education.

All of us who share an underlying belief in political and social equality should try to become more aware of—and hopefully overcome—our own biases. But it's particularly important for institutions to watch out for ways in which these biases play out. Many of the most important decisions affecting individual lives take place within our schools, hospitals, and companies. It's within these environments that many of the inequalities that still trouble us as a nation continue to persevere. Yet it can be difficult to spot instances of racism because of the number of variables at work in any given individual situation. Using [aggregate data](#) to demonstrate the prevalence of racially biased decision-making is often more effective than trying to demonstrate bias on a case-by-case basis. It's easier to demonstrate that blacks aren't being promoted proportionately in a given environment than it is to prove that this particular individual was held back because of racial bias.

Increasingly, public institutions are beginning to implement some of the policies outlined above. We believe that when it comes to racial bias, most people really do want to do “the right thing.” The challenge lies in recognizing what holds us back and developing the right tools to do it.

Linda R. Tropp is Professor in the Department of Psychological and [Brain Sciences](#) and Director of the Psychology of Peace and Violence Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Rachel D. Godsil is Director of Research at the Perception Institute and Eleanor Bontecou Professor of Law at Seton Hall University School of Law.

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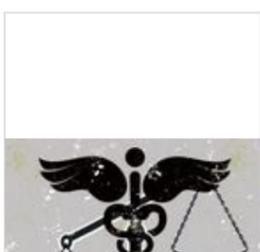
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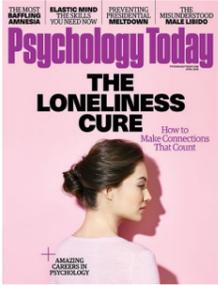
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