Exploring Reflections and Conversations of Breaking Unconscious Racial Bias

Sydney Spears Ph.D., LSCSW
Race the Power of an Illusion: The Difference Between Us

• https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7_YHur3G9g
Racial Prejudice
Intergroup preconceptions - attitudes & emotional responses

Racial Stereotypes
Cognitive component of intergroup bias - negative & positive

Unconscious Racial Bias
Automatic hidden reactions to racial material in favor of or against a person or group that is typically unfair or harmful
Stories of Blindspots

OUR Hidden *Unconscious* Bias
Our Hidden Iceberg:
Our Unconscious Stories
Neuroplasticity

• What we experience, do, & repeatedly thinking about becomes internalized in the brain/mind as our reality.

• Held in the limbic system of memory & emotion as well as areas of frontal cortex

• What wires together Fires together, but flexible
• Neural network firing—strengthens

• Associations and Repetition
Unconscious Bias Researchers

Implicit Association Test (IAT)
measure strength between associations
Harvard, Virginia, and Washington

Mahzarin Bangji, Anthony Greenwald & Malcom Gladwell

David Amodio
Neuroscientist, Researcher, and Psychologist

Susan T. Fiske
Researcher of Psychiatry, Social Psychology
Neuroscience-Based Research

Prejudiced reactions are linked to structures in the brain that activate rapidly

Mirror neurons: Dominant groups/individuals tend to mirror others less than non-dominate groups or individuals

Dominant $\rightarrow$ More Power & Less Empathy
Racial Stereotypes

- Cognitive component of intergroup bias
  negative or positive cognitive associations

- Encoded/storage associations influence one’s perception and behavior

- Supported by the anterior temporal lobes (social knowledge retrieval)

- Medial and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (social impressions)
Racial Prejudice and Bias

Research Findings—Unconscious Racial Bias

• Only 12 percent of prejudice/bias expression is overt
• Unconscious (automatic) bias -> Can result from one situation
  • Automatic detection of fear, threat, or mistrust
  • Supported by the amygdala (early threat or reward processing)
  • Fear conditioning involving the amygdala
Neuroscience & Bias

• Amygdala activation is frequent when subjects view members of racial outgroups mainly supported by:

  • Orbital frontal cortex (processing affective cues & judgments)

  • Insula (visceral reaction and related emotions) higher activity

  • Medial prefrontal cortex (empathy and social impressions)

  • Striatum (approach response)
Role of the Amygdala (Am) in Unconscious bias

• White subjects viewing images of black faces or mouse tracking

• Amygdala activation was greater in response to darker than light

• (Am) Response is stronger with initial or brief exposures

• (Am) response in some studies may show anxiety about appearing prejudiced
Neuroscience & Bias

• Pairing an unrelated task while viewing images of racial outgroup, race will not drive the (Am) response (i.e. identifying team members, preferences)

Pairing social traits will activate the amygdala (i.e. age)

Some studies found no (Am) activation in response to racial groups
Methods focused on tasks rather than directly upon race
Neuroscience & Bias

Literature suggests (Amygdala) activation is from a conditioned threat and mistrust reactivity to racial outgroups

Increase of bias when stressed, approved by authority, or peer pressure

Inconsistencies between subject’s perception of prejudice and behavioral bias expression found from research measures such as the IAT

IAT $\rightarrow$ conceptual association, intentions, and cognitive control
Shooter studies

University of Chicago Study
Psychologist, Joshua Correll

Police officers, community members, and students playing video game

Whites tended to shoot armed Blacks faster than other armed Whites

Faster to avoid shooting an unarmed white man than unarmed White man

Biases register on the brain as quickly as one-fifth of a second
Unconscious mind-brain Bias Regulation

Difficult to detect, control or change →

Cultural reinforcement, emotional/cognitive associations, and the subconscious—unconscious nature of the mind

Biased tendencies regulated from brain structures for cognitive control, perspective taking, empathy, & conflict processing, response inhibition (PFC: anterior/posterior cingulate cortex)

Subjects with positive attitudes toward POC showed greater activity in the left Prefrontal Cortex—
(cognition control, attention, and cognitive processing)

Top down regulation needed for regulation of automatic bias
Brain-mind Hardwired Biases – Why?

Safety/Protection
Scanning the Environment
Certainty
Comfort and Inclusion
Sameness/similarities to self
Attraction to noticing novelty
Negativity
Confirmation: Evidence of personal perspective
Category-Making with Complexity (race, gender)
Patterns (quick processing)
Tribe/closeness
Brain-mind Hardwired Biases

- Fast Brain (Emotional) $\rightarrow$ Quick Generalizations w/o details
- Reporting-Recall $\rightarrow$ Selective Attention
- Associations
- Repetition
- Default Mode Network
- Connection to Others
- Cooperation
- Fairness
Unconscious Bias Story Mitigation

• Left Prefrontal Cortical activation-slow brain-reflection

• Common Humanity—Compassion

• Acknowledge your biases

• Self-awareness of reacting differently to certain racially diverse people
Unconscious Bias Mitigation

• Mindfulness: Pause, notice & label your own potentially biased language and thinking: Curious about Discomfort

• Awareness of racial generalizations (i.e. “some”)

• Prior to decision-making, judgments, evaluations, or responses assess for potential racial biases
Unconscious Bias Mitigation

- Disguise names or other racially identifying information during hiring

- Considering another’s POV or a check-in buddy

- New linkages/associations → Positive traits

- Challenge stereotypes and racial biases
Unconscious Bias Mitigation

• Increase exposure interpersonal cross-racial experiences

• Common humanity, self-compassion, and compassion for others

• Challenge organizational racial explicit and implicit biases (policies, procedures, communication, practices)

• Notice what our children are absorbing