

How Mindfulness Can Help Dislodge Unconscious Racial Biases

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As the national conversation about racial prejudice — and its role in deadly police confrontations with unarmed people of color — continue, one point of analysis has been how to address and reform implicit bias. As Mother Jones writer Chris Mooney explains, we've reached a new race paradox in America: overt racism is less acceptable than ever, but we're a culture that loses a black man to police violence once every 28 hours. Racial biases are also still alive and well within academia and in the workforce.

Researchers from Central Michigan University may have uncovered a finding that could contribute to addressing implicit racial associations in the subconscious. Practicing *mindfulness* could help combat racial biases, according to the small, new study.

For the study, 72 white students completed the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a social psychology metric meant to examine the strength of a person's automatic associations. For this particular experiment, the test paired images

of black, white, old and young faces with negatively or positively associated words.

Before the IAT, half of the participants listened to a 10-minute audio recording about mindfulness meditation. The recording instructed them to become aware of physical sensations, and to accept these sensations as well as their thoughts without resistance or judgment. The other half listened to a 10-minute discussion of natural history.

The researchers found, consistent with previous research, that white people have a quicker response time for positive words associated with white faces than positive words associated with black faces, as well as a quicker response time for negative words when paired with black faces rather than white faces. The subjects also had stronger associations between young and good, as well as old and bad.

However, the study also demonstrated that the short introduction to mindfulness meditation decreased these implicit age and race biases. This may be because mindfulness reduces the brain's reliance on automatic associations, thereby tempering biased thinking, the researchers hypothesized.

Last year, New York University research found that among people with strong race biases, there are larger differences in how the brain registers faces of different races, meaning that they perceive greater differences between black and white faces.

Still the new findings provide some heartening evidence that changing knee-jerk reactions may be possible — and not only when it comes to race.

“Essentially, mindfulness should reduce the negative associations we have with any stereotyped group, allowing us to treat people on a more individual level rather than through a layer of prejudgment based on the associations of their group,” one of the study's authors, Dr. Adam Lueke, said in an email to The Huffington Post.

The study was published in the journal Social Psychology and Personality Science.