

Reducing Implicit Bias within the Police Force

The study and research of implicit bias has existed for many years. In light of recent events, in cases where the use of force by law enforcement officers was questioned because of racial disparities, it has become vitally important that information on multi-cultural awareness be permeated through police departments to more deeply understand why relations between police officers and members of the community are sometimes described as broken.

What is bias?

Ever since humans have walked the earth, each one has had a bias towards different elements of life. Most people think of bias as an opinion on a topic when communicating or towards a group of people. Though humans do have bias with regards to people and topics of discussion, biases can be opinions of foods, religions, or places. In essence, it is a cognitive reasoning, consciously or subconsciously, determining how we make decisions.

Is that different from implicit bias?

Implicit bias is a more specific type of bias in that its focus is directly concerning people and certain out-groups that have uncommon features and behaviors. Implicit bias is more aptly described as the automatic association people make between groups of people and stereotypes about those groups. And under certain conditions, those automatic associations can influence reactions and behaviors. ¹ Every single human being has a natural bias towards most things in life.

Is implicit bias different from racism?

Yes. People are not naturally racist; however, they are naturally group-minded and have a need to “fit in.” ² Humans find and associate themselves with people that they have things in common with like ideology, religion, food, and experiences. Implicit bias is categorized into two groups; an in-group and an out-group.

Someone who has grown up in an environment and characterized commonalities with their friends and/or family subconsciously develops the in-group category. They share the same language, experiences, maybe the same religion, or food. Implicit bias occurs when people must associate themselves with what they subconsciously associate as an out-group. ³

This differs from what early researchers would describe as explicit bias, which is a prejudice towards out-groups, of which a person was self-aware; racism for example. ⁴

Through several lines of research since the 1990's, it was concluded that most police officers have an implicit bias towards a minority or race because there was an associated perception of the race/minority and their “typical” crime involvement. To continue, a biased association of race or minority involvement in crime can influence decisions and reactions of police officers towards other races and minorities. Research in the areas of sociology, political science, and law enforcement along with data from the Department of Justice further indicate that these automatic associations can result in more frequent stops, and potentially, aggressive, or even violent, interactions from the police. ⁵

It is imperative that police departments, agencies, and academies include multi-cultural awareness into the classroom, and more importantly, into the more practical training activities.

Implementing Computer-Based Video Scenarios

Criminal Justice professionals have established a new training standard through computer simulated scenarios that force a police officer to make a split second decision on whether or not to pull the trigger on their service weapon. As part of a study, a police officer was given a location (i.e. neighborhood, alley way, street corner), a person of the same or different race that appears, and the presence or non-presence of a weapon. ⁶

Though the study initially proved that police officers do in fact make automatic racial associations which caused them to shoot either more quickly or shoot a person without a weapon, it also demonstrated to professionals that it could be used as a useful training tool.

Though fewer than 50% of police agencies, departments, or academies use video based training with their officers, ⁷ it allows police officers to train and focus on indicators of threat rather than demographics and appearance. ⁸

Implementing a Bias Intervention Group

Wisconsin University researchers have established five essential functions of an intervention group within a police department that address implicit racial biases. These groups can be used as a metric for administrators and supervisors to evaluate officers' initial understandings of bias and how they are progressing, a method of understanding of participants, and recollection for future cases involving force, if necessary.

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Researchers suggest the following strategies. ⁸

1. **Stereotype replacement**- This strategy involves replacing stereotypical responses with non-stereotypical responses. Using this strategy to address personal stereotyping involves recognizing that a response is based on stereotypes, labeling the response as stereotypical, and reflecting on why the response occurred.
2. **Counter-stereotypic imaging**- This strategy involves group members imagining, in detail, counter-stereotypic others. For example, think of an intelligent African-American person, a famous person of color (Barack Obama), or a non-famous person of a different race that is a close personal friend.
3. **Individuation**- This strategy relies on preventing stereotypic inferences by obtaining specific information about other group members. Using this strategy helps people evaluate members of the target group based on personal, rather than group-based appearance.

4. **Perspective Taking-** This strategy involves taking the perspective, in the first person, of a member of a stereotyped group. Perspective taking increases psychological closeness to the stigmatized group, which ameliorates automatic, **group-based evaluations**.
5. **Increasing Opportunities For Contact-** This strategy involves seeking opportunities to encounter and engage in positive interactions with out-group members. Increased contact can diminish implicit bias through a wide variety of mechanisms, including altering the cognitive representations of the group or by directly improving evaluations of the group.

There are steps that can be taken to improve officers' mindsets to help improve relations between police and community members. Police supervisors and instructors can address what terms, phrases, and words are acceptable. After multi-culturalism awareness is amplified, "real life" training scenarios may be used to reinforce appropriate cognitive decisions for dealing with any person at any time. Finally, experienced and high ranking officers take the lead and continually evaluate performance to ensure their effectiveness on new candidates and current officers.

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