



The Science of Training

with David Blake

Unpacking implicit bias in policing

To truly understand implicit bias is to know it does not equate solely to racism or prejudice, but rather is a fundamental way human beings function

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Implicit bias is the new catchphrase for what is wrong with the nation's police officers and law enforcement in general. Yet, important points are left out of the rhetoric surrounding law enforcement implicit bias. One point being that every single human on the planet has unconscious thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward people, places and things that affects our judgments and decisions. To truly understand implicit bias is to know it does not equate solely to racism or prejudice, but rather is a fundamental way human beings function. Bottom line, we are built this way and for good cause.

Those familiar with Daniel Kahneman's "System 1" instinctual thinking paradigm or Malcolm Gladwell's "Thin Slicing" will understand that intuition (bias) is not only human but necessary. Without unconscious guidance, we would accomplish little in a given day while contemplating the technical facets of brushing our teeth. We, humans (yep - cops too!), learn and store information over the lifespan through training and experience. This allows us to make quick, unconscious and often correct judgments about people, places and things that are based the patterns we've learned. However, there are times when these judgments and decisions can be wrong.

The facts

The big issue with implicit bias isn't its basis in humanity, but rather that police officers may subconsciously use force based on it - or do they? According to 2016 research from Washington State University, participating officers' bias likely caused them to hesitate using deadly force against black suspects compared to white suspects. In this study, officers were also more correct in deadly force decisions against blacks than whites. Another study found the same hesitation, but also demonstrated how police training ensured correct decisions between armed and unarmed black and white suspects. We've potentially seen this type of hesitation in real life situations when officers don't respond appropriately because they are fearful of the ramifications.

The limitation with racial disparity in use of force discussions is the lack of centralized data and an agreeable manner of how to analyze it if it existed. The most comprehensive data available on officer-involved shooting deaths is found in the Washington Post. Their data does more to debunk racial disparity in officer-involved shootings than it does to support it. Recent academic support comes from a 2016 Harvard study of police use of deadly force which found no racial disparity in officer-involved shootings.

While racial disparity in deadly force situations is a current social issue, these study findings don't mean law enforcement is off the hook. The same WSU study from above illustrates that during testing, 96 percent of the officer participants implicitly associated black Americans with weapons. Additionally, the Harvard study did find racial disparity in non-lethal uses of force, sometimes significant. We also cannot ignore existing research showing a racial disparity in traffic enforcement stops and subsequent vehicle searches. While it may not be happening everywhere and to the level some suggest, it should be no surprise that implicit racial bias exists within law enforcement. However, contrary to popular belief, methods to mitigate implicit bias remain unproven.

Implicit bias training

To begin, we all must ask the fundamental question in regards to implicit racial bias: Can an eight hour, 24 hour or 40 hour diversity class reduce subconscious prejudice learned over a lifetime?

Even the most prolific implicit bias trainers cannot give an empirical answer to this question.[1] A 2009 meta-analysis of prejudice reduction programs conducted at Harvard University found that \$8 billion dollars was spent in corporate diversity training with little or no demonstrated impact. A quote from the study states, "...sensitivity training administered to medical personnel and police are rarely based on theory or subjected to rigorous evaluation." Interestingly enough, more recent studies have found that certain methods of teaching social bias can actually increase stereotyping. Has the water become muddy enough?

While I agree that awareness education on the subject is important, many others are skeptical of the long-term benefits. From a training proficiency point of view, keep in mind how difficult it is to overcome an old skill with a new one. If the new skill is not regularly practiced or correctly learned, old skills will take over – especially under a time constraint or stress. However, this does not mean we cannot increase awareness and try to remind ourselves that not everything is what we initially think it might be.

Awareness appears to be the only validated answer we currently have. Are you racially biased? Take the Harvard Implicit Bias test (link & instructions below) and find out. Be safe and be vigilant.

[Harvard Implicit Bias Test Instructions](#): please click on this link, read the information and click “I wish to proceed”. On the next page, scroll down to “Race IAT” and simply follow the instructions. Knowing is half the battle.

[1] Fridell, L. (2017). SpringerBriefs in Criminology (page 58) states in regards to scenario based anti-bias training: “...We do not know empirically how much is enough and that research is needed”.

About the author

David Blake retired from a northern California police department after 15 years of federal and local police. He is a Force Science Certified Analyst with instructor certifications in DT, Firearms, Force Options Simulator and Reality Based Training. His career included duties within SWAT, Force Options Unit, Field Training, Gangs and Narcotics. He currently teaches Human Factors and Force Encounters Analysis for the California Training Institute. David is an adjunct professor, police academy instructor and owner of the Blake Consulting and Training Group. Blake holds a BS in Criminal Justice Management and a M.Sc. in Psychology.

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