SOCIAL SCIENCES

How to Unlearn Racism

Implicit bias training isn’t enough. What actually works?

By Abigail Libers

Illustration by Benjamin Currie
In February 2016 I sat in a conference room on the upper east side of Manhattan with about 35 other people attempting to answer what seemed like a straightforward question: What is racism?

I—a white, able-bodied, cis-gendered woman in my 30s—thought that racism was prejudice against an individual because of race or ethnicity. That's why I had signed up for the Undoing Racism Workshop, a two-and-a-half-day anti-racist training that analyzes race and power structures in the U.S. I wanted to gain a better understanding of why some people have so much contempt toward those who are different from them. My yearning for answers came from personal experience with discrimination as a Jewish woman and the daughter of immigrants; my parents fled to the U.S. from the former Soviet Union in 1979. Growing up in a small town in upstate New York followed by an even smaller, more rural town in Georgia, I was picked on and often felt “othered.”

The workshop was hosted by the People’s Institute North of the Border (PINOB), an organization that was founded 40 years ago by community organizers who wanted to create a more equitable society by addressing the causes of racism. Our leaders—a Black man, a white woman and a Latina woman—called on each of us to share our definitions of racism. People’s responses were all over the map, from “a mindset, a learned way of thinking” to “a discrimination based on someone’s skin color or ethnic background.” The trainees validated each of our responses by pointing out how varied they were and explaining that few of us had identified racism as a web of institutional power and oppression based on skin color. Not having a simple or agreed-on definition of racism makes it easier to keep racism in place. To undo racism, they said, we need a common language that ties together individual and systemic factors. Hurting racism described as a power hierarchy was eye-opening for me. I had been marginalizing myself; I thought I was sensitive toward other groups who faced discrimination. I thought I got it.

Over the past several months, America has been reckoning with racism on a scale that has not been seen since the civil rights movement. The recent killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and others sparked protests against systemic racism and police violence that have drawn multiracial participation. However, white Americans accused Black Lives Matter protesters for the first time—the movement has been active since 2013—and saw close up the police brutality they previously only read about or witnessed through short video clips on phone screens. These experiences were a tiny window into the reality of violence and oppression that Black people endure. The pandemic further exacerbates the racial disparities that people are experiencing, with Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. It has become widely discussed that police violence and virus deaths are not disparate issues—they are both embedded in a pervasive system of racism.

PINOB’s definition of racism (which is similar to that of other anti-racism organizations such as the Racial Equity Institute) is prejudice plus power. It describes how individual and systemic racism are tied together. All of us have individual race prejudice; anyone can prejudice a person based on race alone. But what makes racism different from individual prejudice is that it is institutionalized. While white people control our government systems and institutions in every sector, from law enforcement and education to healthcare and the media, leading to laws and policies that can advantage white people while disadvantaging everyone else.

White people’s dominance in our systems is why you may have heard people refer to the U.S. as a white supremacist society in recent months. In this context, white supremacy does not refer to hate groups such as neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan but rather an entire system where one group has all the advantages. “Racism is white supremacy,” says Joseph Barondi, an organizer and core trainer with PINOB and author of Undoing Racism and Placing Racism: The Twenty-First Century Challenge to White America. “It’s empowering one alleged racial group over another and creating systems to reinforce that.”

As more white people seek to confront and undo racism in their own lives, they are figuring out how to “do the work.” In recent years implicit bias trainings, which aim to expose people to counter-stereotypic associations and stereotypes they hold and express unconsciously, have been widely used to raise people’s awareness of racism in workplaces. But addressing bias alone is insufficient for confronting the racist systems, ideas and legacies that are present in our day-to-day lives. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but research shows that undoing racism often starts with understanding what race and racism actually are. It is also crucial to develop a positive racial identity; to feel—not just intellectually—that racism harms all of us and, finally, learn how to break prejudiced habits and become an active anti-racism. Doing so, however, is not accomplished in a weekend. For me, one of the first steps was unlearning false ideas about the basics of racial categories.

Seeing Whiteness in the Origins of Race

Race is deeply embedded in our society, yet it is persistently misunderstood. The concept of racial categories is actually quite modern, explains Crystal Fleming, a professor of sociology at Stony Brook University and author of How to Be Less Stupid About Race: “If all white Americans accepted Black Lives Matter protests for the first time—the movement has been active since 2013—and saw close up the police brutality they previously only read about or witnessed through short video clips on phone screens. These experiences were a tiny window into the reality of violence and oppression that Black people endure. The pandemic further exacerbates the racial disparities that people are experiencing, with Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities disproportionately affected by COVID-19. It has become widely discussed that police violence and virus deaths are not disparate issues—they are both embedded in a pervasive system of racism.

In 1966, sociologist Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore defined race as a socially constructed category, and over the years, the concept has evolved to include both biological and cultural attributes. According to Davis and Moore, race is a social construct that is used to classify people into groups based on shared characteristics, such as skin color, physical features, and cultural practices. This classification system has been used historically to justify discrimination, oppression, and the exploitation of certain groups.

However, the concept of race has also been critiqued for its limitations and for promoting a false sense of racial difference. Many scholars argue that race is not a natural category but rather a social construct that has been created and maintained by social and political forces. For example, the concept of race is often used to justify discrimination and inequality, as well as to create a sense of racial superiority and inferiority among different groups.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to move beyond the concept of race as a fixed, immutable category. Instead, there is a growing emphasis on understanding race as a social construct that is shaped by historical and cultural factors. This approach recognizes that race is not a natural category but rather a social construct that is created and maintained by social and political forces. This approach also recognizes that race is not a fixed category but rather a social construct that is shaped by historical and cultural factors. This approach recognizes that race is not a fixed category but rather a social construct that is shaped by historical and cultural factors, and that it is constantly evolving and changing over time.

Although biology has shown that there are no genetically distinct races, racial identity is very real. In a white-dominant society, white people tend to be unaware of their identity and may think of themselves as neutral, nonracial. According to the work of psychologists Janet Helms, who developed a framework of white identity development in 1989, the first stage is defined by a lack of awareness of cultural and institutional racism. This stage is characterized by a lack of awareness of the role of race in shaping one’s identity. However, as one moves through the stages and becomes more aware of the ways in which race shapes one’s experience, a sense of conflict or discomfort may arise. This stage is characterized by a realization of the ways in which race shapes one’s experience and a desire to challenge racism.

Overall, the concept of race is a complex and evolving social construct that is shaped by historical and cultural factors. While it is important to recognize the ways in which race shapes one’s identity, it is also important to challenge and dismantle the systems of racism and oppression that continue to exist in society.
This awakening may lead people on work on creating a positive racial identity away from white supremacy. Shame isn’t an effective motivator and can inhibit the stamens needed to push for systemic change.

CWS shifts the focus, and thus the blame, from the victims of racism to the white actors who enact it. This research demonstrates how these hidden biases impact our attitudes and actions, which result in real-world consequences such as racial profiling.

Workshops aren’t enough over the past 50 years or so initiatives to address racism have focused briefly on implicit bias trainings. A growing body of cognitive science research demonstrates how these hidden biases impact our attitudes and actions, which result in real-world consequences such as racial profiling.

The trainings are often sponsored by human resources departments but delivered by employees outside consulting firms, which may consist of modules that walk people through what implicit bias is and how it affects them. From how it shows up in the workplace, how it is measured (typically through the Implicit Association Test) and how to reduce it. Over the past decade these trainings have been widely used in the law-enforcement industry as well as the tech industry, with companies such as Facebook and Google putting thousands of employees through trainings. More recently, anti-bias trainings have been implemented in schools as well.

While these seminars may be useful in exposing people’s hidden biases, these revelations have not been shown to result in long-term behavioral change on an individual or systemic level. In a 2018 paper published in Anthropology Now, Harvard University sociologist Frank Dobbin writes: “Hundreds of studies dating back to the 1980s suggest that implicit bias training does not reduce bias, alter behavior or change the workplace.”

A recent meta-analysis of 463 studies (with a total of 87,418 participants) on the effectiveness of implicit bias training found weak effects on unconscious bias. The authors note that “most studies focused on producing short-term changes with brief, single-session manipulations have produced trivial changes in behavior.” The authors conclude that changes in implicit bias are possible, but they do not necessarily translate into changes in behavior.

Implicit bias trainings raise awareness, but they also tell people: “This is just how it is. It’s not your fault.” Kelly Green, co-founder and co-director of the Perception Institute, an organization that works with social scientists to identify the efficacy of interventions to address implicit bias, racial anxiety and the effects of stereotypes, “It kind of leaves people feeling like they are let off the hook.” It’s not that your brain is hard-wired to be racist, but it is programmed to put people into categories. And the categories that have been constructed in the U.S., Green explains, have tendencies that lead to negative perceptions.

Antiracist trainings, such as the Undoing Racism Workshop, differ significantly from implicit bias trainings in that they are more intense on both an intellectual and emotional level. Because they are not done in a corporate setting, trainees tend to be more honest and raw. In the PSAB’s training, we took a hard look at white supremacy and our role in upholding it. After reviewing a historical account of how racism is linked to the criminal justice system and how this culture of violence and oppression and privilege, and how this culture of violence and oppression and privilege.

PSAB’s methodology is rooted in community organizing principles that the group’s founders honed for decades. Their approach is based on principles such as building trust, which focuses on linking knowledge to action so people can make real change in their communities. Other antiracist trainings, such as those offered by Crossroads Antiracism Organizing & Training, provide a similar approach. In contrast, Robin DiAngelo, author of White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism, who has received much attention in recent months, gives “keynote presentations” that are more focused on individual prejudice and white privilege.

PSAB’s training is so powerful in many ways, it is unclear to what degree they are effective—and if they are, how and why they work. A 2015 study published in Race and Social Problems Problems aimed to track the training’s impact and found that approximately 40 percent of participants engaged in racial equity work after completing the Undoing Racism Workshop. "These trainings are intense, and we don’t know if they work, because there aren’t randomized controlled experiments to prove that they do," says Patrick Devine, a professor of psychology who studies prejudice at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Trainings on implicit bias, diversity and antiracism may be limited in their efficacy in part because they tend to be brief one-off efforts. Promising research by Devine in 2013 showed that prejudices and biases can be more successfully unleashed through a cultural shift. In 2015, a study led by Devine was based on the premise that implicit bias is like a habit that can be broken through the following steps: becoming aware of implicit bias, looking deeply into the consequences of that bias and then using strategies to reduce bias—specifically, ones that replace biased reactions with responses that reflect one’s non-prejudiced goals. The premise is that the strategies needed to “break the prejudice habit” come from two sources: first, you have to be aware of your biases, and second, you have to be concerned about the consequences of your reactions. Then you need to develop strategies to eliminate them. Recent research has shown that interacting with a wide variety of racial groups can help people care more about racial justice. For instance, a 2019 review suggested that increased contact among racial groups deepens psychological investment in equality by making people more empathetic. For Fleming, who has attended thousands of university events, teaching about bias within the context of a comprehensive, three-month course “is far more effective than being dragged into a diversity training for one day,” she says. “People have to feel inspired. They have to feel a desire to critically reflect on not just their biases but on their consciousness and conditioning and to be part of a positive social transformation. You can’t force that on anyone.”

FELING THE HARMED OF RACISM But perhaps the most critical is that people start to feel what motivates me to unlearn racism, to retrain myself on the_statistics of America, and to open my eyes to white supremacy and the pervasive power of white supremacy. It needs to be translated into a commitment to practices such as breaking white silence and bringing an antiracist lens to my work. That is only possible and sustainable, by building empathy and feeling the ways in which racism is not just harmful for people of color—it hurts white people too.

This is a conversation that I think I took PSAB’s workshops for the first time in 2019. I had signed up at the urging of Stoop Nichols, a social worker and racial justice coach who shows white people how to be better allies. During the workshop, Barnard, one of the trainers, pointed out that "easy to be white for people to think racism does not harm them. But "the truth is, we lose too," he said. "All of humanity loses. With the end of racism, we get our lives back."

Shelley Versen, a critical health researcher and professor of public health and medicine, studies how white supremacy culture impacts the mental health of both white and non-white populations. In a 2019 paper, she and her co-authors found that studies have been driven by the myth of neutrality, that the work that hard and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps leads to success. When this does not happen (for example, if you do not land a new job), it threatens your worldview and leads to significant stress, research shows.

Versen notes that many white people oppose social programs such as the Affordable Care Act that would actually benefit them, in part because they believe these programs are designed to benefit people of color. In her recent book, Painful Whiteness, physician Jonathan Metzl writes about how some white Americans support politicians who promote policies that increase their risk of sickness and death.

Another way we are all turned on a day-to-day basis is through white supremacy culture. In Raising Cane’s and Tema Okun write in the book Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, the characteristics of white supremacy include perpetuation, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, individualism, and more.

Understanding and feeling how racism hurts me—even though it is a mere fraction of the pain of people of color—helps to reduce the stigma and sense of guilt that I feel. I know how to talk about it. It helps me to contextualize the research that I need to consistently work to undo it. I wonder if white supremacy culture contributes to my elevated anxiety levels, which manifest as migraine headaches and sleepless nights. I am more often connecting with white supremacy culture with climate change denial as well as the paternalism and overt right thinking I have experienced in various jobs.

Working with Nichols is helping me create a positive racial identity of my own. It is not just about learning what to say in front of people of color. The narratives that are so often used to define racial identity, such as language, food, culture and music are discouraged; those from a non-Western European heritage are often vilified. In my family, my parents were so committed to learning English that they hardly ever spoke Russian around the house. I never learned it. It saddens me that I can’t support my own parents in their learning. I still think in English and have no idea what they mean.

In the midst of COVID-19, a high-stakes election season and racial protest movements that illuminate issues affecting communities of color, many Americans are reevaluating what makes us white. People may be waking up to areas of their lives that were previously inaccessible to them and to histories and literature and legacies that have long shaped our country and society. This awakening may lead people to work on creating a positive racial identity away from white supremacy, which is based on fully acknowledging the fact that knowledge to pursue equality and justice for everyone. Skipping that step risks giving up or doing even more harm, shame and self-loathing are not the answer. In her book, Versen explains that the strength and stamina needed to push for systemic change.

Having been in this process for myself for several years, I am certain of one thing: that only one way is to know what it means to be white. In her book, Versen explains that this is the first step in creating a more just and equitable society, and that knowledge to pursue equality and justice for everyone. Skipping that step risks giving up or doing even more harm, shame and self-loathing are not the answer. In her book, Versen explains that the strength and stamina needed to push for systemic change.

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RECOMMENDED
by Andrés Lavrylewski

On December 2, 1943, a German air raid bombarded a port in the Italian city of Bari. Among the 40 ships that were damaged, destroyed, or sunk was the U.S. Liberty ship John Harvey, which carried a secret cargo of 2,000 mustard gas bombs. With the ship’s destruction, mustard gas leaked into the harbor and dispersed into the clouds of smoke and flame from the bomb. In 24 hours more than 600 people in the area reported symptoms of mustard gas poisoning. Writer Constant gives an intimate account of the surprising twist that evolved out of this devastating military disaster. Observing the cell-killing effects of mustard gas on victims’ tissue samples, diligent doctors Lieutenant Colonel Stewart F. Alexander and Colonel Conauton P. Rhodes, among others, carried out research that led to several cancer therapies, including methotrexate, which is still in use today. The next field of chemotherapy that resulted suffered innumerable obstacles and setbacks—some treatments proved toxic, and others offered only temporary inhibition of tumor growth. Often more than 75 years have passed since the work began. Constant shows how the challenges facing modern oncologists—and their determination to keep trying new treatments—bear a remarkable resemblance to those early efforts.

A Series of Fortunate Events: Chance and the Making of the Planet, Life, and You
by Sean B. Carroll

Beyond Earth’s Horizon: The Poetry of Spaceflight edited by Julie Swartstad Johnson and Christopher Colin
University of Arizona Press, 2020 (B915S)

The idea that chance rules our lives “vaporizes the confidence of metaphysicians,” biologist Carroll writes. But for the author, this notion is also a fascinating revelation. With a conversational wit, Carroll encourages us to embrace the randomness of the world. If the planet that we call home survived for 30 minutes earlier or later, for instance, the impact would not have produced enough heat and aerosols to precipitate a mass extinction. And in the microscopic realm, spontaneous quantum fluctuations last one-thousandth of a second cause mutations in our DNA, enabling both evolution and cancer. Drawing philosophical inspiration from Nobel Prize–winning biologist Jacques Monod’s 1970 Chance and Necessity, Carroll explores these and other cosmological, geological, and biological accidents that have shaped the course of the universe—and that continue to shape our individual lives.

The heavens are fertile ground for poetry. They are, after all, the original tapestries on which our ancestors wove their myths and legends, making sense of life on Earth by projecting the deeds of deities and heroes onto titular constellations and planetary conjunctions. With the dawn of the Space Age, a new era of myth-making was also ushered in, one in which the outer space actions of astronauts, robots and satellites could profoundly influence the hearts and minds of everyone dwelling down below—including some of our world’s great poets. Offering selections from Ray Bradbury, Niki Giovanni, Robert Hayden, Pablo Neruda, Mary Swenson, and many other luminaries alongside their own works, editors Johnson and Colin have created a profoundly stirring evocation of the glory and tragedy of spaceflight that lets us better see not only worlds beyond but also ourselves.

Lee Billings

Nasimi Oreskes is a professor of the history of science at Columbia University, author of Why Trust Science? (University Press, 2016) and co-author of Discovering Experts (University of Chicago, 2009).

Sexism and Racism Persist in Science

We kid ourselves if we insist that the system will magically correct itself

by Nasimi Oreskes

Temperatures are running hot in science (as they are in the U.S. at large) as the field embarks on a long-overdue conversation about its treatment of women and people of color. In June, for example, thousands of researchers and academics across the globe—as well as the pre-eminent journals Nature and Science—stepped away for a day to protest racism in their ranks. The American Physical Society endorsed the effort to "shut down ITEM, declaring its commitment to "eradicating systemic racism and discrimination" in science.

Physics isn’t the problem. African-Americans make up 14 percent of the college-age population in the U.S., compared to their numbers in the overall population, but in physics they receive for 8 percent of undergraduate degrees and less than 3 percent of Ph.D.s. And as of 2012 they composed only 2 percent of faculty. No doubt there are many reasons for this underrepresentation, but one troubling factor is the refusal of some scientists to acknowledge that a problem could even exist. Science, they argue, is inherently rational and self-correcting.

Would that were true. The history of science is rife with well-documented cases of misogyny, prejudice and bias. For centuries biologists promoted false theories of female inferiority, and scientific institutions typically barred women’s participation. Historians of science and MacArthur fellow Margaret Rossiter has documented how, in the mid-19th century, female scientists created their own scientific societies to compensate for their male colleagues’ refusal to acknowledge their work. Sharon Bertsch McGrayne filled an entire volume with the stories of women who should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for work that they did in collaboration with male colleagues—or, worse, that they had stolen by them. (Rosalind Franklin is a well-documented example of the latter: her photographs of the crystal structure of DNA were shared without her permission by one of the men who then won the Nobel Prize for elucidating the double-helix structure.) Racial bias has been at least as pernicious as gender bias. It was scientists, after all, who codified the concept of race as a biological category that was not simply descriptive but also hierarchical.

Good scientists are open to competing ideas; they attend to challenging data, and they listen to opposing views. But scientists are also human, and cognitive science shows that humans are prone to bias, misinformation, motivated reasoning and other intellectually pitfalls. Because reasoning is slow and difficult, we rely on heuristics—intellectual shortcuts that often work but sometimes fail spectacularly. (Believing that mere men are, in general, better than wom-

Illustration by Amy Wachol

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