



Memorandum

Date: June 16, 2020

To: WellSpace Health Colleagues

From: A. Jonathan Porteus, Ph.D.
Chief Executive Officer

Re: Mid-Month Message: Implicit Bias – Part III

Colleagues,

I am so grateful for the outpouring of responses to the last Mid-Month Message exploring the public health crisis that marks the ‘other’ pandemic we are dealing with – the pandemic of racism. When we say someone is being racist it conjures up images of a KKK member or someone with a torch marching through Charlottesville, VA a few years ago yelling the Nazi slogan “Blood and Honour.” The Dean of African American Affairs at one of the universities where I taught used to call people being racist like this the “*easy-to-see racists*” and once said something to me like “*at least with the easy-to-see racists I know what I’m dealing with, it’s the people who don’t even know they are being racist or the institutions that have structural racism that frighten me more.*”

Friday’s message outlined the twin deadly forces of COVID-19 and racism for which **we** are the vectors. And key to ‘putting on the mask’ to contain the spread of racism are (1) understanding privilege and (2) understanding implicit bias. Based on the feedback I have received, and some of the insights I gained from re-reading the 26 items pertaining to privilege, I’m hoping that those of us with the privilege of whiteness were able to have a somewhat jarring experience over the weekend as we explored the extent of those 26 items in our lives. What we see is that privilege is a series of *unearned* benefits, advantages and attitudes that are given to the privileged group without their even trying to have them and often without their knowing. Like wearing a mask at all times around others and being mindful of the danger you could bring them, neutralizing the devastating impact of dominant cultures that reinforce these invisible and unearned attributes can only be achieved through an intentional, consistent, non-defensive acceptance of one’s privilege and commitment to limiting or eradicating it.

Deep down with our privilege, and also acting outside of our awareness, lie the attitudes or stereotypes affecting our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These might be beliefs about the colour of a person’s skin, whether a person has a disability, a person’s sexual orientation, and even things like what kind of music you find peaceful or not. These are also known as our *implicit associations* to things, and the ones that

reinforce inequity and injustice are called our implicit biases. People with explicit biases are “*easy-to-see racists*,” but since our implicit biases are at work outside of our awareness, when our unconscious beliefs are discriminatory we have within us a potential time bomb of beliefs and stereotypes about ‘race’ and all manner of ‘difference’ whether we like it or not. This means that I, Jonathan, have un-earned privileges associated with being white and being a man that are there *whether I like it or not* and that I have to look for and contain. This means that I, Jonathan, have beliefs about people and any number of things that I have picked up in my experience or have been subtly trained to think that influence how I see and experience the world *whether I like it or not* and I have to root them out and contain or delete them. And this means that we, because of our implicit associations to things (whether they are biased or not) have built whole institutions influenced by those biases.

For people who are explicitly biased, they are aware of their bias and may proudly commit hate crimes. For others who are explicitly biased they may intentionally ignore job applications of people who they think are not white or put a confederate flag on a piece of their property even after the whole universe has said it’s offensive. But the implicit biases are more subtle. Take musicians in orchestras. For centuries, orchestras only had male musicians. This meant that male privilege was explicit and the whole institution of orchestras was biased and had uncontrolled male privilege. Then we had a period of suffrage and openness and orchestras started to hire women. But the proportions of men to women did not change quickly and if the person auditioning was *visible* and was a man, he was more likely to be selected; and if the auditions were anonymous and the recruiters could not see the musician, more women were selected and their proportions in orchestras rose quickly. But holding auditions anonymously is not always practical, so we rely on the people holding the auditions to check for their implicit bias and work on understanding the fact that gender and musicality are not related to one another so they should focus on the quality of the music. Unfortunately we then have to deal with what are often the ‘bad seeds,’ people who perpetuate the inequity consciously or unconsciously. Harvey Weinstein’s decades of rape are a very vivid example of an individual weaponizing his male privilege and institutions normalizing or allowing it. The same goes for all institutions, where the institution itself is blind to inequity or even supports it, and individuals operating within the institution are either blind to their biases or even embrace their biases because they can get away with having them.

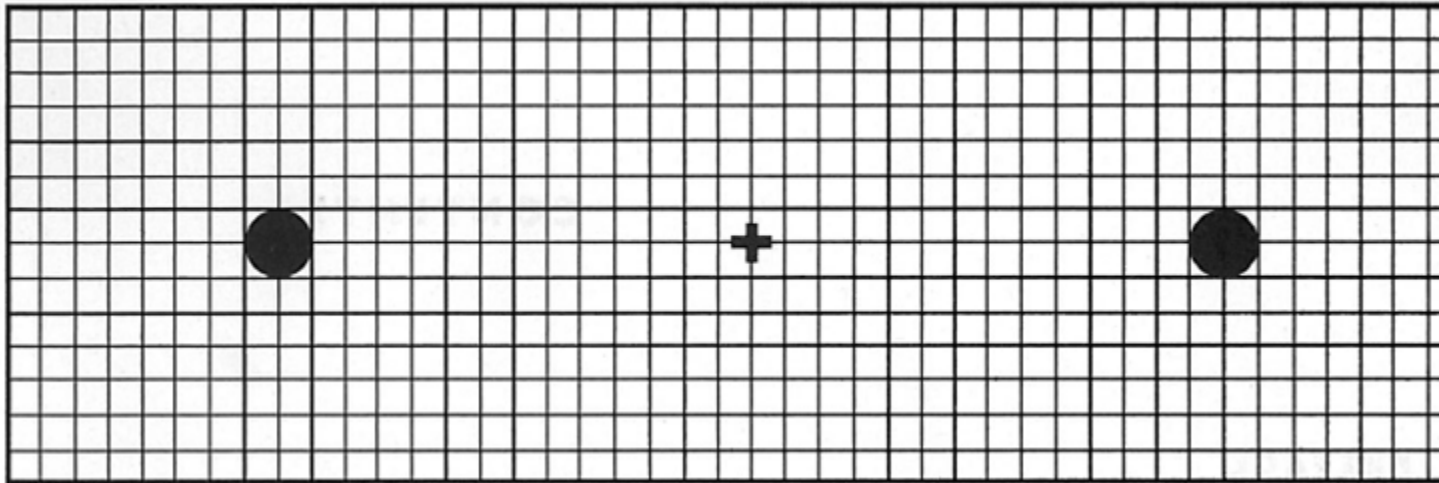
We may not always know whether a bias was implicit or explicit, but the biases express themselves often suddenly and sometimes violently. Did Amy Cooper lead a life of bigotry leading up to her moment in Central Park when she threatened to call the police because she was breaking park rules and interrupting a peaceful bird watcher? We don’t know, but in that moment her implicit bias emerged and she called the police to say *she* was being bothered by a man; but not just a man, a black man. In that moment her implicit or explicit bias emerged and she weaponized it by calling people with guns. When Officer Betty Shelby murdered motorist Terrence Crutcher was she acting on her explicit bias? It’s unlikely, but in the moment she responded to her implicit programming and “*became emotionally involved to a point where she overreacted?*” Did Officer Johannes Mehrserle act out his explicit bigotry or an implicit bias

when he “*accidentally drew his service weapon instead of his Tazer*” on an Oakland BART platform when he murdered Oscar Grant? And it’s hard to apply any reference to ‘implicit’ anything with Derek Chauvin after suffocating George Floyd to death for 8 minutes and 46 seconds.

So what underlies our implicit associations and the biases emerging from them?

I am drawing heavily from my September 2016 Mid Month Message sent at a time when cities were burning in the wake of the repeated killing of Black Americans. At that time the names being chanted were Trayvon, Freddie, Oscar, Philando, Joseph. And today we just touch the start of the list when we say, Rayshard, George, Breonna, Ahmoud, Stephon. But while we must say the names of the dead, we must also look at the culture we have created and reinforced because it keeps propagating racism at a rate that clearly shows that we are not addressing the public health crisis of racism with the same total societal commitment that we are addressing the public health threat of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19. So how are we perpetuating the context in which these terrible events are happening? And, while we may not always be able to change the world around us, how can we ***exerting an influence on ourselves*** and put on the mask to stop the vector of racism?

Bear with me please as I take a rather elliptical path...



From: *Blindspot*, Banaji, M and Greenwald, A. (2015)

The image above is one of many images that tease out our *visual lacuna*, or visual blind spot. While the majority of the inside of our eyeball has photoreceptors, there are none right where the optic nerve leaves the back of the eyeball (makes sense – there is a hole there). This means that we truly have a blind spot at the back of each eye that leaves a gap in our vision. Here is how we can actually see how it affects us!

Try this:

Look at the plus sign in the middle using one eye at about arm's length

Cover up the other eye

Slowly move towards the image still focusing on the plus sign (this works on computers and phones and tablets)

At about six inches from the image, the spot on the same side as the eye you are using should disappear

If you move your gaze to the spot on the other side, the plus sign should disappear

The spot disappears because there are no photoreceptors at the back of the eyeball where this spot is being processed. Makes sense, right?

But try it again and look for something else. Watch the background *behind* the black spot – ***the grid stays there even though it is in our blind spot and we should not be able to see anything in that spot anymore!*** Yup, we 'see' the grid even though we cannot see it. And how do we see something that is not visible? Because our brains love to fill in the gaps and give us a fluid image rather than a broken one – even if we have to add a bit of information that is not there....

The actual blind spot makes sense, and we get to 'see' how our brain logically continues the background and inserts a grid even in our blind spot by making an association to what's around it. These kinds of 'mindbugs' happen in a lot of automatic ways to make our experience make sense. But remember, ***we are filling in a gap in our experience so that we can see something that is not there.***

This is where my elliptical path brings us back to the start, back to our present day reality, our roles in this organization, and our implicit associations and biases. What we know is that *implicit associations guide us like filling in the grid in our blindspot* and they can lead to implicit biases. And while we feel like we might not always be able to change the world around us: ***What are we all doing to perpetuate the cultural memes and stereotypes that influence us implicitly? How are our blindspots affecting us in the world and in the workplace? To what extent are we reinforcing, endorsing or simply ignoring the blindspots of those around us?*** If we are not mindful of these questions, then we start to become the monsters.

Luckily we can address implicit associations and, in so doing, we can build a more harmonious and inclusive ecosystem for ourselves. I was fortunate in my early years as an immigrant to this country. Supervisors, mentors, professional experiences, journeying in to native mountain communities in northern Mexico, doing outreach into Native American communities all helped to weave a more complex tapestry of the cultural groups to which I was exposed. I had basically never been around Spanish-speaking people and Native American people and had to build a total mindset about cultural groups and also dig out the common negative themes that I had internalized through mainstream American media throughout my early years in England (remember the show Baywatch was the most popular show in Egypt for many years, and a lot of Germans think that the lead actor in that show was actually a major player in bringing down the Berlin Wall). And as I learned to feel the mantle of my whiteness and maleness (the 'mantle' is William Faulkner's way of talking about privilege) I had to dig deep, had to look at the holocaust perpetrated by one side of my heritage (I am half German), the legacy of oppression and imperialism perpetuated by the other side (I am half British), the nuances of my privilege in therapeutic relationships with my clients, my appetite for embracing diversity, etc. I was aided in this process by a growing literature on our implicit processes and the increasing availability of tests to assess one's biases – namely the various Implicit Association Tests (IATs) available through Harvard University's [Project Implicit](#). Through these tests I was able to explore my associations to black, white, Native American, skin tone, and gender, among other things, and test them out in the real world. I worked in a hospital in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn where I saw my colleagues of Caribbean descent often created hierarchies based on the darkness or lightness of their skin. I taught courses to beginning therapists and finally saw the colour that came with my whiteness and the way it played out in interpersonal settings. I worked with clients who lived with the multiple stigmas and stereotypes that came with their skin colour, of their mental health condition, or their addiction, or their health condition, or some combination of these factors.

Last week I asked you to talk with others about the 26 items related to privilege. Now I'm going to encourage you to take some tests to help build insight into each of your sets of implicit associations. Within these implicit associations like our implicit biases. As you take these tests I'm going to ask you to be the kind of colleague who strives to understand and contain implicit bias and asks the questions:

What am I doing to perpetuate the cultural memes and stereotypes that influence us implicitly?

How are my blindspots affecting me and others in the world and in here at work?

To what extent do I reinforce, endorse or simply ignore the blindspots of those around me? This is important stuff and may be the only thing we can do to impact what is going on around us. For example, a physician colleague of mine once told me about taking the 'Disabled – Aabled' Implicit Association Test. He found that, while he did well in other areas of diverse cultural interaction, he has a bias against people in wheelchairs. Would this influence his

willingness to order durable medical equipment or a powered wheelchair for a patient? Would he conduct physical exams as fully with a person in a wheelchair as someone not in a wheelchair? And, he reminded me, how did he have this surprise bias given that his mother had been in a wheel chair since he was 14?

You can find the tests at - <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html> - and I would encourage you to do as many of them as possible. For those of you who do not have the privilege of whiteness or maleness, please still try the tests...

Our decision to increase our insight and perhaps change our behaviour needs to come from within. With almost 900 of us working together the main things is to consider this issue, take some of the IATs, and see how this shapes our interactions. The Implicit Association Tests are free and the whole process should take less than 10 minutes per test.

Through this process, along with a deeper understanding of our privilege and broader cultural competence we are less likely to automatically respond with stereotyped perceptions and more likely to mindfully engage with our colleagues, clients, families, and communities.

It's time for change and that starts with each of us. See where this takes you, and where it takes us...

Best

Jonathan