

A More Progressive Approach: Recognizing the Role of Implicit Bias in Institutional Racism

By DeAngelo Bester

In the past year, the tragic deaths of unarmed Black males such as Mike Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford and Tamir Rice have helped to spark a robust dialogue around race in America. Many people have argued that none of these deaths were racially motivated. Others have argued that race had everything to do with them. I would argue that both sides are right.

Many people in this country only see racism as individual acts of bias against people of color: Someone painting a swastika on the side of someone's house or burning a cross on someone's front yard, or a group of inebriated college kids using the N-word during a song about their fraternity. But there is an entirely different group of people, self-identified as liberal, progressive or radical, that sees racism in institutions and structures. For us, the images we associate with racism are a school that is majority white, but the majority of the students who get suspended are of color, or an upscale restaurant that only has white staff working as hosts and servers and chefs, while all the staff of color work the lower paying jobs. It's an entire country that is two-thirds white but has a prison population that is two-thirds people of color. For us, this is what racism in the 21st century looks like.

So the question remains, what is racism? Is it individual acts of hatred against individuals of color? Or is it state- and corporate-sanctioned discrimination and violence against entire communities of color? Of course,

it's both. This simple answer is only the start of understanding how the killings of the unarmed Black men I referred to earlier can have everything to do with race, but may not have been acts of racism in the way that many people understand them.

Instances in our recent past have sparked discussions about race in America. The Rodney King beating and following LA uprisings, the case of the Jena 6 and the election of President Obama all have brought race into the public discourse. What's different now is that more people are beginning to talk about the role implicit bias has played in maintaining a power structure that continuously disadvantages people of color.

Implicit bias is bias that is buried deep in people's unconscious, so deep

they often are not even aware of it. Some of us may have a harmless bias toward a particular color, city, animal (cat people versus dog people). The one thing to know is that we all have biases. Our brains are designed to categorize people and things, and to create preferences, anxieties, animosity and fear about specific things. This includes creating preferences or animosity toward people of different races or ethnicities. In fact, implicit bias can, and often does, affect conscious decision-making. Institutional philanthropy and those making decisions about grant-making strategy are no exception.

I wholeheartedly believe that implicit bias played a major role in the police killings of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, John Crawford and Tamir Rice. Maybe it's the



#BlackLivesMatter protest in Rochester, MN. CC image courtesy of Rose Colored Photo.

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optimist in me, or my desire to believe in the basic goodness of all people, but I don't think the police officers who killed these young men did so with hatred in their hearts. I think our society has marginalized, criminalized and demonized Black people for hundreds of years, and the result has been the development of a collective fear and hatred of us. For many years, that hatred and fear was explicit, but our society has evolved. Unfortunately our unconscious brains have not evolved as quickly. I think the police officers in most of these cases were greatly influenced by their own unconscious minds, which didn't see young Black men in the prime of their lives, or young Black men with limitless amounts of potential. They saw violent criminals who would do them physical harm if they didn't respond with deadly force.

Our public discourse around race has finally begun to move away from individual acts of prejudice and bias and address institutional and structural racialization. But even this bigger-picture conversation is incomplete. We must include implicit bias and how it affects people's conscious decision-making in our discussions on race. But these discussions must go beyond some of us on the left trying to educate moderates and conservatives. Unfortunately, many of our allies on the left, including foundation staff and trustees, have just as high or even higher levels of implicit bias toward Black people and Black-led organizations as conservatives do.

While not as explicit as the well-documented underrepresentation in sectors such as the corporate sector,¹ and even organized labor unions,² I would argue that there is a high level of implicit bias toward Black people within the world of community organizing and social justice philanthropy.

To be clear, I'm not asserting that social justice philanthropy has the high levels of implicit bias that many of our

police departments do. But I have noticed a pattern among some foundations where Black-led organizations, primarily organizing Black people, are excluded from funding. I come to these conclusions based on my observations of who and what foundations typically fund, and also from anecdotal stories from Black executive directors I've had conversations with. (Over the course of about four years, I did more than 250 one-on-ones with grassroots Black leaders, organizers and executive directors.)³

I'm sure many people may wonder how I could even think that the world of social justice philanthropy is biased against Black people, given all the initiatives over the years that have focused on Black males or boys and men of color. To that, I would say that if one looks closely, many of the initiatives for Black males or boys and men of color have tended to provide resources to organizations and programs that either focus on direct services or changing individual behaviors – not on changing systems through organizing, movement building and structural reforms.

"They offered to give us money to tell Black men to pull up their pants, and teach them how to dress and speak properly so they can get a job," said one Black executive director of an organizing group from the Bay Area, whose organization turned down money from one of these philanthropic initiatives.

Also, when it comes to the initiatives focused specifically on Black males or males of color, a significant number of the organizations that received money had no Black leadership. So, while it seems that funders were willing to give money to help Black people, they just weren't willing to give money directly to Black people. "They're willing to fund our liberation, just so long as we're not in charge of the money or have a say in how liberation happens," said one Black executive director from Chicago.

Speaking about a particular funder, a Black female executive director from a New York nonprofit noted, “The work we do is aligned perfectly with their priorities, but I can never get anyone over there to return my call or respond to my emails, even though they’ve publicly praised our work.” When I asked her why she thought that was, she at first said that it seemed like the funder in question didn’t like Black people, but then quickly dismissed that idea. After all, one of its core priorities was to fund work that advances racial justice.

Black people have the highest rate of unemployment, highest rate of low-wage work and highest interactions with the criminal justice system. Yet, several foundations that have criminal justice reform and worker rights as core priority areas don’t fund any or very few Black-led groups that are doing great work in these areas. One reform-focused foundation I investigated funded exactly one Black-led group doing criminal justice reform work over a three-year period. Given the social justice priorities of many foundations, the dismal lack of funding given to organizations led by people of color adds to the case that implicit bias plays a role in their grantmaking.

Admittedly, there could be any number of reasons why this is happening – maybe these organizations submitted poorly-done proposals, or maybe the foundations would only fund groups with a certain level of capacity. Maybe some of the directors I’ve spoken to are just overly-sensitive. I don’t have definitive proof for why Black-led organizations are so often passed over. What I do know is that if we’re going to take conversations about race to the next level, then implicit bias must be at the heart of those conversations.

Here are a couple of ways the social justice philanthropy sector can proceed:

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- **Make program staff take the Implicit Association Test (IAT):** The knowledge of knowing that one has an elevated level of implicit bias toward a particular racial group can be a motivator to work toward reducing it. My organization has an objective of getting police officers to take the IAT. We believe that doing so can go a long way toward helping to reduce bias within their ranks. The same can be said for staff at social justice foundations.

- **Invest in internal political education and training around implicit bias:** Progressive allies in philanthropy and the larger organizing community must develop a strong understanding of implicit bias, along with strategies to temper bias from these organizations. Progressives naively think that racism and racialization occur only within conservative circles, and not within their institutions. This cannot be further from the truth. It is a mistake to think that implicit bias does not play a significant role in the lack of capacity on the part of many Black organizations.

If we’re ever going to move the thinking and actions of Middle America, and maybe even conservatives, about race and implicit bias, then we on the left must also have the conversations ourselves. The world of social justice philanthropy is the perfect place to begin having these discussions. ■

DeAngelo Bester is executive director of the Workers Center for Racial Justice.

Notes

1. Ben Walsh, “Corporate America’s Diversity Problem On Display at Deal-Book Conference,” *The Huffington Post*, December 2014, www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/12/12/corporate-diversity-lack_n_6315664.html.
2. George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination*, Springer Science & Business Media, 1985.
3. Confidential interviews conducted by DeAngelo Bester from 2010-2014.