

SUPPLEMENTARY PAPER II:

**CAN “DE-BIASING” STRATEGIES HELP TO REDUCE
RACIAL DISPARITIES IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE?**

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

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Scholarship about implicit, or unconscious, racial bias has become increasingly sophisticated and robust in the past decade. This research suggests that most individuals harbor stereotypes that affect, often unknowingly, their perceptions of the character and qualities of different races and ethnic groups. The most sophisticated test, the Implicit Association Test, measures the ease and speed with which test participants can match concepts such as “violent” or “peaceful” with photos of people of different races.ⁱ Results show that both White and Black test takers match Black faces more quickly than White ones with words representing violent and aggressive concepts.ⁱⁱ The striking aspect of this test is that this bias pattern exists both among those who express explicit prejudices and those who deny them.ⁱⁱⁱ

As our knowledge about how implicit racial bias is triggered, and how its impact on our decisions and actions has grown, a strong hypothetical case can be made for its contribution to the stark racial disparities that figure so prominently in school discipline data. We underline the term hypothetical because there is not yet, to our knowledge, any direct evidence that the implicit

racial bias held by decision-makers in the disciplinary chain contributes to the disproportionate numbers of children of color who are severely punished in schools.

That said, there is clear evidence that children of color are punished more severely than White children for relatively minor, subjective offenses in schools. These are the very types of behaviors that require judgment and discretion by the decision-maker in determining punishment. There is also research that illustrates how the implicit biases or assumptions held by adults with decision-making authority lead to harsher treatment of Blacks than Whites for similar behaviors. Considered in tandem, these two sets of studies strongly suggest that implicit racial bias contributes to the differential treatment of children of color—particularly Black boys—in school settings.

The more subjective the category of offense—i.e., insubordination, disobedience, disruption, defiance—the greater the risk that bias (either explicit or unconscious) will seep into the process.

First, Children of Color are Punished More Severely than White Children for Subjective Offenses

We know from the research of Indiana Professor Russell Skiba that the racial disparities in school exclusion rates are most pronounced for subjective offenses, such as “disobedience” and “insubordination,” where a decision-maker interprets the seriousness of a student’s behavior.^{iv} Similarly, Gregory and Weinstein found that “defiance” was the single most common reason for an office referral, and that a higher percentage of African American students’ referrals were for defiance than White students.^v A study of schools that implemented PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) found that African American students were more likely than White students to receive out-of-school suspensions for minor infractions.^{vi} We also know from ethnographic studies that students are often

punished for what officials believe to be their “potential” to be dangerous,^{vii} and that “removing a student from class is a highly contextualized decision based on subtle race and gender relations.”^{viii} In other words, regardless of a school’s official disciplinary policy, there are a variety of factors involved in determining a student’s punishment, not the least of which is the

mood, ideology, philosophy, values, and biases of the adults making that decision. The more subjective the category of offense—i.e., insubordination, disobedience, disruption, defiance—the greater the risk that bias (either explicit or unconscious) will seep into the process.

Second, Implicit Bias Leads to Differential Treatment

The IAT (Implicit Association Test) is the most commonly used measure of implicit bias.^{ix} Of the thousands of individuals who have taken the test, researchers have found that 80% of tested Whites and 40% of tested Blacks show a pro-White bias. They consistently implicitly associate Blacks with negative attitudes such as bad and unpleasant, and with negative stereotypes such as aggressive and lazy.^x

The research literature on implicit racial bias in school settings, and in the related settings of the criminal and juvenile justice system, provide us with insights into how the individual biases of teachers, school administrators, and school resource officers could produce racially disparate disciplinary outcomes. In one ethnographic study, authors observed that Caucasian female teachers do not treat African American students as positively as Caucasian students, using 16 variables, and that African American boys received the least favorable treatment from their teachers.^{xi} In another, the author observed two kindergarten boys—one Black and one White—over the course of a year. The teacher attributed external factors, such as the child’s family situation, to problems experienced by the White boy, but internal factors, such as a lack of self-control, for the Black students’ behavior.^{xii} These observations are startlingly similar to those made in another study, where authors found that probation officers consistently attribute the delinquency of Black juveniles to negative attitudinal and personality traits, but White youths’ actions to the influence of his or her social environment.^{xiii} Critically, these judgments affected their sentencing decisions, and resulted in harsher treatment of youths of color than of White adolescents for similar offenses.

In another study, authors examined the potential for racial stereotypes to affect decisions made by police officers and probation officers. By simulating conditions with experimental priming, they determined that, once activated, racial stereotypes can affect judgments about juvenile offenders’ character, culpability, negative traits and “deserved punishment.” The authors concluded that: “racial disparity in the juvenile justice system can partly be understood as the outcome of a complex causal process that begins with unconscious stereotype activation

and ends with more punishment of African American offenders.”^{xiv} They also posited that parallel racial disparities in school discipline may also be caused, at least in part, by the activation of unconscious stereotypes of teachers and administrators.

The impact of unconscious biases on assessments of guilt and innocence are illuminated in two articles by University of Hawaii Law Professor Justin Levinson. In one study, Levinson gave participants an identical set of facts about a defendant. Half saw a photograph of a dark-skinned suspect, and the other half a White suspect. Those shown a dark-skinned defendant were significantly more likely to find ambiguous evidence indicative of guilt than those shown a photograph of a light-skinned suspect.^{xv} In another experiment, Levinson used names as proxies for race. Prospective jurors read about a fictional incident. Half read about “William,” and the others half about “Tyrone.” The facts of the incident were exactly the same. Participants more frequently remembered aggressive details when Tyrone was the defendant. Levinson concluded “that the race of a civil plaintiff or a criminal defendant can act implicitly to cause people to misremember a case’s facts in racially biased ways.”^{xvi} These findings would suggest that decision-makers in the school disciplinary chain could similarly “misremember” the facts of a school-based incident in a racially biased way, or interpret ambiguous evidence as proof of guilt when the rule-breaker was a student of color.

Third, Intervening to Reduce Implicit Bias

The positive news is that unconscious stereotypes are not set in stone. They can be “unlearned.” According to well-known scholars Mahzarin Banaji and Jerry Kang, “Self, situational, or broader cultural interventions can correct systematic and consensually shared implicit bias...recent discoveries regarding malleability of bias provide the basis to imagine both individual and institutional change.”^{xvii} Another set of researchers found “great promise” in the finding that police officers were able to overcome a tendency to shoot too quickly at African American suspects with adequate training.^{xviii} In yet another study, researchers observed that many judges will apply a “cognitive correction” to their implicit biases, if motivated to do so.”^{xix} Sheri Lynn Johnson has found that “The best candidates for non-prejudiced reactions are a group who are called “chronic egalitarians”—people who monitor their own reactions and behavior in an effort to root out stereotypes and feelings of which they don’t approve.”^{xx} Certainly many teachers, school administrators, and school resource officers fall into this category.

One of the nation’s leading implicit bias scholars, Patricia Devine of the University of Wisconsin, likens bias to “habits” that, with intention and practice, can be broken. Her research has found that three conditions need to be in place for individuals to successfully “de-bias:”

1. Intention: Acknowledgement that one harbors unconscious biases, and motivation to change.
2. Attention: To when stereotypical responses or assumptions are activated.
3. Time: To practice new strategies designed to “break” the automatic associations.

Devine and her colleagues developed a “multi-faceted prejudice habit-breaking” intervention that lasted eight weeks. Those participating were given a “toolkit” of five strategies, and asked to practice at least some of them on a weekly basis. The strategies were:

1. Stereotype Replacement: An individual recognizes that he or she is responding to a situation or person in a stereotypical fashion. (S)he considers the reasons and actively replaces this biased response with an unbiased one.
2. Counter-stereotypic Imagining: Once an individual detects a stereotypical response, he or she thinks of examples—either famous or personally known to the person—that prove the stereotype to be inaccurate. For example, if a person judges an African American male as lazy or incompetent, (s)he imagines Colin Powell or Eric Holder.
3. Individuating: This strategy involves gathering very specific information about a person’s background, tastes, hobbies, and family, so that one’s judgments will be based on the particulars of that person, rather than on group characteristics.
4. Perspective-taking involves stepping into the shoes of a stereotyped person. What does it feel like to have your intelligence automatically questioned, or to be trailed by detectives each time you walk into a store? Perspective-taking can be very useful in assessing the emotional impact on individuals who are constantly being stereotyped in negative ways.
5. Increasing Opportunity for Positive Contact: A final strategy for reducing implicit bias is to actively seek out situations where one is likely to be exposed to positive examples of African Americans or others subject to stereotypes. This can involve both seeking out personal contact through shared activities or even watching videos and films, such as the *Cosby Show*, which depicts a strong, healthy, and successful African American family.

As a result of the intervention, participants simultaneously self-reported increased concern about racial discrimination, and tested lower on the Black-White IAT for implicit biases against Blacks than those in a control group who did not receive the intervention. “Our data,” Devine et al. explain, “provide evidence demonstrating the power of the conscious mind to intentionally deploy strategies to overcome implicit bias.”^{xxi}

Can De-Biasing Reduce Racial Disparities in School Settings?

Devine’s work offers a good starting point for thinking about how to test and measure the effects of implicit racial bias on the treatment of students of color in schools. At this point, we know enough both about how unconscious biases are triggered, and how they can be countered, to design and test interventions aimed at more clearly understanding how and to what extent implicit racial biases may be contributing to what has come to be known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” for children of color.

That said, there are ample challenges ahead. First, since motivation to change is a precondition of “breaking the prejudice habit,” we must pay careful attention to how and under what conditions educators are taught about implicit bias. Many are likely to shut down or grow defensive if they believe they are being accused of racism. Thus, there will need to be great care, and likely considerable trial and error, concerning the most effective way to introduce this topic, and the degree of trust that will need to be established before educators open up about their own biases.

Second, while the five strategies introduced by Devine have shown promise in reducing implicit bias, there is much we still need to learn about effective interventions, particularly within the school context. For example, we should carefully examine the work of a host of other practitioners and scholars who are piloting interventions in schools within the context of implicit bias. These include Dr. Anne Gregory of Rutgers University, whose *My Teaching Partner*^{xxii} strengthens the bonds between students and teachers; Dr. Philip Goff of UCLA, whose work with police contains important lessons about reducing the effects of racial bias among educators; Dr. Glenn Singleton, who has pioneered the use of *Courageous Conversations*,^{xxiii} to deepen educators’ understanding of racism; and Susan Cole, who is helping educators create environments that are sensitive to the needs of traumatized children.^{xxiv}

In addition, the growing use of restorative justice in schools may help to “de-bias” because it increases opportunities for positive contact between White teachers and students of color, and because it functions as a form of “individuation.” Similarly, the work of social psychologists like Linda Tropp, at the University of Massachusetts, on racial anxiety may strengthen and deepen our knowledge about the most effective ways to increase positive contact.

Finally, we need to recognize that interventions aimed at reducing implicit racial bias among educators, even if shown to be successful, would address only a piece of the crisis that has come to be known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This is a large social issue that demands a comprehensive response crossing over a myriad of systems (education, juvenile justice, foster care, housing, health care, job creation) and that requires legal, legislative, practice, and policy reforms aimed at structures, institutions, and individuals. Implicit bias research opens up a new avenue for interventions by helping us to better understand—and address—the split-second decision-making and judgments that can determine a student’s future trajectory. In that way, new strategies for reducing its effects may serve as a valuable complement to—not replacement of—ongoing efforts to dismantle the pipeline in all of these other domains.

Footnotes

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Id.
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- ^{vi} Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, Tobin (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latino disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review*, 40(1), 85-107.
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- ^{xxiii} Singleton, G. (2005). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- ^{xxiv} See: <http://traumasensitiveschools.org/>

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