

# Even when suppressing them, biases kick in

BY JOYCE HUNTER

**H**AVE you taken the implicit association test lately? If so, how did you score?

In a previous installment of *One City, Many Voices*, one of our columnists talked about racism, words and intent (published Sept. 2, 2014). Very specifically, she talked about how a controversial statement made by a respected individual in the community is suddenly turned by residents into a look at the speaker's intent rather than at the actual harm caused to the affected group by their words.

"Speculating on the speaker's beliefs and intentions and dismissing the effects of the words allows the audience to criticize those who take offence for 'trying to stir up trouble where there is none,'" wrote Brianne Vescio, adding that racism is woven into our society in many ways and surfaces frequently — whether intentional or not.

When she touched on the surfacing of behaviours (in this case, she was alluding to unconsciously held racist beliefs), I was intrigued. She raised a good point.

We'd like to believe we're open-minded folk



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who treat everyone equally and respectfully.

Our society has begun to spend a great deal of time on being careful not to offend or upset any group of people who are believed to have a disadvantage and it is embracing diversity.

In theory it all sounds great, but it doesn't recognize that our society also conditions people socially, from a very early age, about how to think about, perceive and treat certain groups, things or people in certain ways.

In 1995, psychologists Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji proposed the idea that much of our social behaviour is driven by stereotypes that operate automatically at an unconscious level (they call them implicit bi-

ases). This argument stems from the belief that the content of our unconscious biases are learned from the society in which we live.

From a very early age, they noted, we are exposed to certain ideas over and over from the people we interact with and from the media. Over time, they said, these ideas become so ingrained in us that they are activated automatically without us realizing it.

"Every human being has automatic thoughts and feelings about others based on race, ethnicity, physical presentation (body weight, dress, tattoos, piercings, hair, accents, etc.)," said Gail Price-Wise, president of the Florida Center for Cultural Competence when explaining how prevalent unconscious biases are in society.

**B**UT here's another kicker: In conducting their research, Greenwald and Banaji also found that people's stated biases and their unconscious biases often differ.

For example, a person may consciously express a neutral or positive opinion about a social group that they unconsciously hold a negative opinion about. In 1997 Banaji and

Greenwald then developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a computer-based test that measures people's unconscious attitudes.

The test asks people to complete several tasks where they are asked to quickly pair two concepts together. Scoring of the IAT assumes that the more closely you associate two concepts in your mind, the faster you will be able to pair them together on the task.

Of the thousands of people who have taken the Implicit Association Test, roughly 80 per cent revealed a bias.

There are different variations of the IAT that test one's personally held biases on weight, age, gender, race, and so on. And this brings me to my last question. Have you considered taking the test? You can find it at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

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