

Commentary: 'Implicit bias': The problem and how to interrupt it. Plus, the beads test.



Michelle Sharpe Silverthorn, second from right, with her husband, Daniel, and children Evelyn, left, and Maya. (Family photo)

By **Michelle Sharpe Silverthorn**

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Let me tell you a story about implicit bias. In 2009, I married a man I met the first day of law school. He is white. I am black. We live on Chicago's North Side. I often walk around my neighborhood with my two biracial kids. My kids could pass for white. And because I am black, I am often assumed, by some well-meaning parents, to be my children's nanny. I am asked how much I am paid, do I have any friends looking for work, or am I looking for work. I was once told, "You treat them just like your own kids!"

And it's not just what's said. It's what unsaid. It's when those well-meaning parents don't sit next to you on the bench, include you in conversations, or look you directly in the eye, because they think you are the nanny.

When they treat you like someone who just doesn't belong. Now they would never claim they were doing it on purpose, or that they were acting biased at all, until you ask them, "Why do you think I am the nanny?"

See, this is implicit bias. And it helps explain (in part) the rash of publicly reported incidents over the past month of white people calling police on people of color who look like they just don't belong.

It's because (in part) they think one thing should only be this way, because they have only ever seen it this way, and cannot adjust their mind to seeing it any way else.

How can we interrupt that bias? How can you interrupt that bias?

Start by accepting that we all have biases. We need to stop pretending we don't notice differences. We do; we all do, even if it's unconscious.

Then, examine your circle of influencers. There's a great exercise I've done at my job. I give you a glass bowl and an empty cup. The bowl has beads of six different colors. I assign each bead a different race or ethnicity. Then I ask you to assign beads to the names or categories that I list to represent the race or ethnicity of that person or group. For each that you have an answer for, put one or more beads in your cup. "You." Put a bead or beads in your cup. "Your significant other or spouse." "Your neighborhood that you grew up in." "Your childhood best friend." "Your favorite teacher in elementary school." "The author of your favorite book." "Your favorite professor." "Your boss." "Your wedding party." "Your current neighborhood." "Your first mentor." "Your doctor." "Your dentist." "Your senator." "Your president."

Now look at your cup. Is it as diverse as you would have thought? Is it mainly one color? This is the world you have built for yourself. These are the sources of the biases in your head, and the result of acting on those biases. What does your cup look like? Who's in your world?

One last tip. Get uncomfortable. A white friend once said she would feel uncomfortable attending an all-black church. I responded that I understood because I have been in more all-white churches than I can count. And all-white conference rooms. And all-white elevators. And all-white classrooms, bars, weddings and hockey games.

Minorities live and breathe in majority spaces. If you want to interrupt bias, then start entering spaces where you are the minority. Become aware of your biases. Become aware of your expectations. Become aware of what you say and how you think of people who don't fit into your preconceived notions. That's the start of interrupting implicit bias.

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