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## Upfront

### Subtle Bias

#### Why racism persists in a politically correct world

By Andrea Orr

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## WORKPLACE RELATIONS

# Subtle Bias

## *Why racism persists in a politically correct world*

Few managers working in the United States today would admit to racial prejudices. And while some do quietly harbor their own personal biases, it is reasonable to presume that at least as many really do strive to treat all workers fairly.

Why, then, decades after the civil rights movement, do so many African-Americans consistently experience prejudice in the workplace?

According to a study published in

the June 2004 *Social Justice Research*, “Managerial work is prone to unintentional social justice violations,” largely because managers don’t have a lot of time to make thoughtful decisions.

Previous research has shown that long before a manager makes a deliberate decision about which candidate is more talented, for instance, he/she is already receiving subtle signals from his/her subconscious. Often, these implicit attitudes are different from a manager’s explicit, stated beliefs. Dolly Chugh, author of the study and a graduate student studying organizational behavior at Harvard Business School, found that the implicit racial attitudes offers a more telling view of how managers really behave when making split-second decisions in a stressful environment. Because of the enormous time pressures faced by

managers, even the most civic-minded people may unwittingly treat blacks and whites differently. Milliseconds matter when deciding who gets hired, who gets promoted, and who gets the corner office.

Chugh uncovered implicit biases using the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which asked participants to quickly categorize words and pictures such as “African-American,” “European-American,” “bad,” and “good.” (The test is available online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.) While few test takers would consciously label members of a particular race as “bad” or “evil,” many do just that when operating under time pressures.

The test found that implicit, or subconsciously biased decisions, often occur in as little as 50 milliseconds, or five percents of a second. And when such small intervals are measured, a lot of implicit biases that would never be verbalized are uncovered. In some tests, as many as 95 percent of all white managers displayed some implicit pro-white bias. Tests of African-American managers have not been as conclusive.

“It resonates so much with me,” says Chugh. “I see many Americans have truly egalitarian intentions, but that hasn’t led to an egalitarian society. There’s an asymmetry between good intentions and bad outcomes.”

A more challenging question that remains is where those biased split-second associations come from. On this point, Chugh says she is more challenged to offer an explanation. Like many of her research subjects, Chugh, who is Indian-American, professes no overt racial biases. But she candidly confesses that when she saw the results of her own IAT test, she realized, “I’ve got plenty of work to do.” —Andrea Orr



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