

The Roots of Racism

What we don't know can hurt us.



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If my purse ever gets stolen, it's Dave Chappelle's fault. In the spring of 1997, I attended a barbecue at the home of a friend in Los Angeles. Since the party was almost exclusively populated by a particular type of television writer (think Conan O'Brien), I was taken aback when a young black gentleman entered the festivities. Given L.A.'s then-fearsome reputation as the home of rogue cops, riots, and drive-by shootings, I was scared that the newcomer was a crack-crazed Crip out for honky blood. But, no, it was Dave. Once I realized my mistake, I spent the entire evening agreeing with his every word and laughing at all the comedian's jokes.

And I have spent the next 12 years leaving my purse wide open and at least six feet away from me. It's my penance for having automatically assumed a black man in L.A. was a criminal. Being black doesn't get me a pass on unconscious negative feelings about African-Americans or the shame we feel when they become conscious. We see the same cultural indicators as everybody else—back then, hours of riot footage, rap videos, and the O.J. trial had created an automatic connection in my mind between African-American Los Angelenos and danger.

So, I was actually excited to read about a new study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in which researchers from the University of Washington confirmed the validity of the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The IAT made a lot of news late last year when results showed that 70 percent of those who took it harbor an unconscious preference for white people over black people. And no, I'm not talking about 70 percent of white people—I mean people of all races who took it, including African-Americans.

I do not think we are a nation of people secretly yearning to scream racial epithets and reinstate Jim Crow. I think we are a nation of people deeply influenced by the stereotypes endlessly perpetuated in our culture. The sassy black hairdresser, the Asian computer geek, the ditzzy blonde, the dorky white guy, and the cool black best friend—each of them are stock characters in our culture. So it is not difficult to believe that we have automated this stereotyping to the point where it happens not in our conscious mind but in its operating system—working in the back of the brain to help process the reams of information coming at us from every direction.

The IAT measures the speed with which you make word associations. Given by computer, the test shows you pictures of black and white faces and asks that you connect them to either

positive or negative words. The assumption is that the faster you make the link, the more automatic the neurological process. So even people who would be horrified to think of themselves as racist find it much easier to match white faces with positive words such as peace, love, and happy. It's harder to match those words to black faces—it's easier to match them to words such as awful, agony, and hate.

So, that's the bad news: we're all racists. But there's good news, too: we're all racists. Knowing we all stereotype and that we all fit a stereotype should make us more open to discussions about our differences. In the 12 years since I thought Dave Chappelle was a gang member, I have agonized about why I damned him so quickly. But I am pleased to announce that all that soul-searching has yielded results. When I took the IAT, it showed that I have little or no automatic preference for European-Americans over African-Americans. I'm not bragging. I write about bias for a living. I know it's hard to step out of our comfort zones and bring our unconscious biases into the light of day. But it may be the only way to get rid of them. "When you are unaware of attitudes or stereotypes, they can unintentionally affect your behavior," wrote Prof. Anthony Greenwald, the lead researcher on the study. "Awareness can help to overcome this unwanted influence."

I thought Barack Obama's election would create some flexibility in our culture's rigid adherence to stereotype, but it's been slow in coming. Perhaps that's because we spend most of our lives surrounded by people who look and act just like us. That guarantees that we will continue to see Difference without making any effort to understand it. My Caucasian husband, who teaches school in a neighborhood that is nearly all black and Hispanic, endures the same suspicion and fear that I do in some all-white neighborhoods.

To move forward, we have to challenge our impression of what people can do with their lives. You know, like imagining an Ivy League-educated community activist from Hawaii who becomes the first black president. It's easier than getting your stuff stolen.

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