

## BOOKS &amp; CULTURE

# Mindfulness Short-Circuits Reflexive Racial Bias

New research finds implicit bias can be tamed through the use of time-honored meditation techniques.

TOM JACOBS · DEC 2, 2014

Racial bias has [declined drastically](#) in the United States over the past few decades. And yet, recent reaction to the tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri, suggests race continues to color our opinions, with both blacks and whites holding firm assumptions that their counterparts completely reject.

It's something of a conundrum, until you consider implicit beliefs—the automatic thoughts and feelings that arise when one looks at an image of someone of another race. While these often operate below our level of consciousness, they shape our views of society and opinions on such policy issues as affirmative action, [voter ID laws](#), and [whether the justice system is genuinely just](#).

Fortunately, [new research](#) has documented a surprisingly simple way to short-circuit these knee-jerk negative associations. The key, according to Central Michigan University psychologists Adam Lueke and [Bryan Gibson](#), is mindfulness.

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In the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, they report that a 10-minute introduction to mindfulness meditation led to “a decrease in implicit age and race bias.” Even when it comes to the emotionally charged issue of race, it seems that slowing down long enough to notice our thoughts and feelings disrupts our tendency to unthinkingly accept reflexively triggered biases.

The small-scale study featured 72 white college students, who were told it was about “the relationship between listening to an audiotope and reaction time.” Half of them listened to a 10-minute introduction to mindfulness, while the others listened to a 10-minute discussion about natural history.

The mindfulness talk, which was based on Buddhist principles, “instructed participants to become aware of bodily sensations (heartbeat and breath) and fully accept these sensations, and any thoughts, without restriction, resistance, or judgment.”

All participants then completed an [Implicit Association Test](#). Black and white faces, as well as older and younger faces, were randomly paired with positive and negative words. The students were instructed to respond to these words as quickly as possible by pressing one key representing “positive” or another representing “negative.”

Previous research has consistently found that whites have “quicker response times for words that represent good things when paired with white faces than with black faces, and quicker response times for words that represent bad things when paired with black faces than white faces,” the researchers note. “Similarly, young people tend to have stronger associations between young and good than between old and good.”

Not surprisingly, the researchers found this implicit racial and age bias in their participants. But it was significantly weaker in those who had first listened to the mindfulness tape and participated in its brief meditation exercise.

“Mindfulness reduced reliance on automatic associations,” which in turn led to less-biased thinking, the researchers conclude.

“The mindfulness tradition is one in which everyone and everything is connected,” Lueke and Gibson write. “Intergroup bias is in direct opposition to this, and the automatic component of this bias leads to behaviors that build boundaries that keep us distant and wary of others.”

Happily, however, their work suggests “the practice of mindfulness can help us overcome these automatic biases.” It’s harder to harbor prejudices in a self-aware mind.