

From the PES Confronting Racism Task Force:

## ***Implicit Racism or Bias***

By Sylvia Metzler

Several months ago, I took the Harvard Implicit Bias Test as a homework assignment for a course in Whites Confronting Racism. I was shocked and humbled by my score. The test shows different levels of bias: strong, moderate, slight or no preference for white over black Americans. Despite my many years of involvement to undo my own and society's racism, I scored a strong preference for whites! To try to understand where my bias comes from, I asked a white friend who scored very differently from me to dialogue about our respective childhoods and early lives. Unlike her, I had a father who used "the N-word." My high school graduated 498 white and two black students. I lived, swam, studied, worshiped and worked in an almost all white environment for the first 25 years of my life.

Since I am involved in a Training for Trainers in Confronting Racism, I decided that I needed to further educate myself about the roots of implicit racism. If I was so unaware of my bias, surely it must exist in many of the people that I will encounter and work with. When I went to the *Gale Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, I was surprised to learn that implicit racism is not the opposite of explicit racism. Explicit bias is overt and intentional. Think 3/5 of a person, slavery, KKK, Jim Crow, white supremacy. Implicit bias is a different, but no less harmful, form of racism. Broadly defined it refers to an individual's utilization of unconscious bias when making judgments and decisions about people of a different race or ethnicity than one's own. Since this type of racism lies beyond the awareness of the person displaying the attitudes or actions, it is quite possible for someone to sincerely report that they hold few if any overt racist ideologies and yet display implicit bias in their everyday interactions with people of color.

Some examples can include: asking to touch the hair of a person of color; generalizing about the behavior of one person to include the whole group; doubting a person of color's experience of racism; seating a person of color at a bad table in a restaurant; following someone around in a department store. If we up the ante, it can include refusing someone admittance to a school or college or denying someone a job or promotion. Or it may result in manslaughter or murder. A recent episode of *60 Minutes* featured the story of Officer Betty Shelby, a white female police officer in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who shot and killed an unarmed black man, Terence Crutcher. The shooting was caught on two police dash cams, one from a helicopter where the pilot was heard to say before the shooting, "He looks like a bad dude." When Mr. Crutcher lowered his hands which had been in the air, his sister later said that he was going to place them on the roof of his car as their father had taught them to do if ever confronted by the police.

Officer Shelby interpreted his move as going for a (nonexistent) gun in the car and so she shot him in self defense. When questioned, she insisted that there was absolutely no racial bias involved in her decision and action. The family and friends of Mr Crutcher believe otherwise. While Officer Shelby will stand trial for manslaughter, we have to ask: What if the Tulsa police force had had intensive training about implicit bias? Might Terence Crutcher be alive today?

I often hear my white sisters and brothers say things like: But I'm not racist. I have black friends. I dated a black person. I don't use "the N-word." But they are totally unaware of how their unconscious bias may be causing problems – large and small, non-lethal and lethal – to people of color. As a trainer I have a great responsibility to challenge and confront prejudice, racism and intolerance when I see and hear them – in myself as well as in others. Just as importantly, I need to do it with compassion, not judgment; with humility and not with casting shame or guilt.