

SHADES OF PREJUDICE

When it comes to racial and ethnic biases, the real question is not whether you have any (we all do); it's what to do about it

Prejudice: An adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts. The action or stand of holding unreasonable preconceived judgments or convictions, irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group, race or religion. - The American Heritage Dictionary

Ethnic and racial prejudice.

Nearly all of us encounter it to some degree, and many of us exhibit it. Need proof? How about putting some common racial and ethnic stereotypes out on the table?

Like, white people are racist. Or, blacks are lazy. Or, most Latinos are here illegally. Or, all Asians look alike. Or, American Indians are alcoholics. Or, Arabs are terrorists. We'll stop there, but unfortunately the list goes on.

If we're honest with ourselves, many of us consciously or unconsciously harbor those assumptions or believe some of those stereotypes about people whose race, ethnicity or culture is different from our own.

While many keep it to themselves, some use it to fuel hatred, intolerance or violent acts against others, sometimes making headlines: beatings of Mexican day-laborers, swastikas spray-painted on synagogues and attacks on Arab-Americans, or people mistaken for Arab, not only on Long Island - one of the nation's most segregated communities - but in New York City, one of its most diverse urban centers.

One recent bias-related incident occurred in January, when someone painted swastikas, "KKK" and a racial epithet in black letters on the home of a black family about to move into a North Valley Stream neighborhood.

Tackling prejudice

Some say prejudice comes from irrational fear of "the other."

"I don't think we're born with it. I think it's something that, growing up in America with our history of slavery, that we absorb from a lot of sources," says Janice Ward Parrish, a white woman who grew up in the segregated Deep South. From an early age, she prided herself on being a "non-prejudiced champion of racial equality" and was surprised as a young adult when she uncovered bias in herself.

"One evening as I was walking to my car ... I heard footsteps behind me. Looking back, I saw an African-American man maybe 25 feet behind me and gaining. I quickened my step, but his were quicker. Just as he was certainly about to rob, rape and beat me senseless, he said, 'Good evening,' and hurried past me. "I had not noticed his business suit and briefcase," she says. "I only saw a black man, the dark predator from the myth that generations of Southern white women have absorbed from nuance and insinuations." Decades later, that incident helped inspire Parrish, now an author living in Boca Raton, Fla., to develop a quiz for others who want to examine and tackle their own prejudices.

"I think prejudice in general is a weed that takes root in any human soil. It grows from fear, and fear is just so basic to us. We tend to be afraid of the unknown," she says. So much of what we learn, even as children, about people of other races and cultures comes from secondhand sources, including parents, peers and popular media, says Gail Satler, a Hofstra University sociology professor.

"Prejudice is fueled by keeping discrepant information out and always finding reinforcing information to bolster what you already believe in," Satler says. "It tends to work when you stay with people who feel the way you do. It's harder when you're in the firsthand situation ... face to face with somebody. Attitudes are anchored in other values. I am a believer that they're learned and that they can be unlearned."

Could some prejudice and bigotry be lurking inside you? (See Parrish's quiz at the end.) If so, how could you uncover it, and then what could you do - assuming you wanted to do something - to eliminate it?

"To me, it's not whether or not we have biases, because we know that everybody does," says Daisy Rios, vice president of Elsie Y. Cross & Associates, a Philadelphia company that works with corporate, educational and government clients on diversity issues. "The real question is what are they, how do I learn more about them and how do I manage them?"

And if you're about to recite some hackneyed line such as, "I'm color-blind," or "I don't see color," reconsider, says Nick Adams, a black stand-up comic, in his first book, "Making Friends With Black People" (Kensington Publishing, \$14), a hilarious take on race relations in America.

"Don't tell us that you 'don't see color.' Aside from being tired and patronizing, it's just plain stupid," writes Adams, whose book is set for release in March. "The fact that you can see me and treat me as an individual regardless of my race is great and all, but does that mean that your rods and cones have ceased to function and you can no longer discern that my skin is darker than yours? Let's leave the term color-blind for dogs and the 8 percent of the population who do actually suffer from the affliction."

Take a hard look at yourself

Self-examination - taking a hard and honest look at how you behave, think and feel toward other individuals, groups, cultures and even nations - is a good starting point, Rios and others agree.

Begin by asking yourself a few questions, such as who is in your circle? Who are your friends? Who are your colleagues? At gatherings, whom do you engage, and whom do you avoid? If you're a manager at work, whom do you recruit, hire, coach and promote? Where do you choose to live, and why?

Rios also recommends seeking feedback from others. Do you practice what you preach? "If I say I want to treat everyone equally, am I really doing that? What are the ways I may not be?" she says. "I may say something that is very well intended, but it may have another impact on others."

Notice when you start making generalizations and assumptions about people of other races and ethnic groups, says Elaine Gross, president of ERASE Racism, a nonprofit organization in Syosset that uses education, research and advocacy to fight racial prejudice through changes in public policies.

You start to generalize when you say things such as, one group always behaves a certain way. You also are treading on dangerous ground, she says, when you assume that what you do, how you do it and what you believe is "normal," and that what another person does, how they do it and what they believe is "abnormal" or "deficient" because their way differs.

Try putting yourself in the other person's shoes, Satler says. The more connected you feel to someone of another race or ethnicity, "the harder it is for you to be prejudiced," she adds. "Employ empathy more."

Ways to embrace diversity

Do what you can do, starting from wherever you are, says Helen Boxwill of Huntington Station, who co-chairs Journey Toward Wholeness, a group at the predominantly white Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington. The group's work is part of a national denominational effort to raise awareness about and eradicate racism and oppression, starting with its congregations and moving out into their communities.

The Huntington group's efforts have included hosting book and film discussions on racism, and joining members of the predominantly African-American congregation at Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church for an annual "evening of fellowship." The congregation is also exploring ways to support the Boys and Girls Club in Huntington Station, which serves mostly black and Latino children.

"As an institution, the church wants to embrace diversity and be welcoming to all people. We've always said it, and now we're starting to do it," says Boxwill, who works as coordinator of the Westbury Even Start Family Literacy Program and is the white mother of three biracial adult children. "It doesn't mean we have to convert anybody, but it means we have to relate to people outside. It has nothing to do with any kind of proselytizing, but everything to do with making a world of justice and seeing what we can do. We actually can do a whole lot."

If recognizing and eliminating racial and ethnic biases isn't a moral imperative for you, as it is for Boxwill, think about it in practical terms, she says.

"This is a global economy. You have to teach children about the world and other cultures and other people because we're all going to be working together in our jobs. You're preparing children to function well and be successful in the world," she says.

"If we have fear of other people, we're depriving ourselves," she adds. "We whites are hurt because we are afraid to make that connection. Once you meet other people, it's so enriching. It's been a great gift for me. I would hope other people could have that wonderful experience."

TEST YOURSELF

1. When telling a story about a person of another race and the point of the story is not about race, do you identify the person as a white woman or an African-American lawyer?
2. When you are in a meeting where your race is in the minority, do you feel nervous or uncomfortable?
3. If you see a person of another race where your race is dominant - say, your club, work, bar, etc. - do you feel inclined to be especially friendly to prove that you are not prejudiced?
4. If a member of another race treats you rudely or especially nicely, do you question whether the unusual treatment is because of your race?
5. Would you hesitate to do business with a member of a different race?
6. Would you be nervous about walking around at night in a neighborhood of a predominantly different race, even though it looked safe?
7. Would you be more hesitant or nervous about making a sales call (whether to sell life insurance or to solicit participation in a neighborhood bake sale) to a person of another race?
8. Would you be less likely to stop and help someone of another race?
9. If you noticed a \$10 bill missing from your belongings at work, would you first suspect a co-worker of a different race?
10. At night on a dark street, would you feel more threatened encountering a person of a different race than of your own race?

Scoring

One "yes" answer: You have been remarkably insulated from racial differences or have overcome your prejudices to a high degree.

Two to three "yes" answers: You have fewer prejudices than most.

Four to seven "yes" answers: You are about the same as most people with regard to racial bias. Further consideration of your answers may change your reactions and reduce your bias.

Eight to 10 "yes" answers: You have a considerable amount of bias but also an opportunity to re-examine your beliefs and base your reactions on experience, not myth.

**BY PAT BURSON
STAFF WRITER**

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Quiz developed by Janice Ward Parrish, author of "The Sweet Shade of a Chinaberry Tree" (Hard Shell Word Factory, \$12.95).

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