

# Alignment Between Antecedents and Interventions: The Critical Role of Implicit Bias

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We applaud the authors for tackling the important issue of policing and race from the unique perspective of industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology. Here, we propose a framework by which to examine the authors’ recommended interventions along the same implicit–explicit dimension employed in the focal article’s conceptualization of racial bias. Mirroring current thinking within the diversity literature, the focal article notes that racial bias is “often very subtle” (Ruggs et al., 2016, p. 531) and can include “unconscious and implicit” aspects (p. 531). Extending this notion of implicit versus explicit bias to interventions themselves, we advocate for increased attention toward more implicitly focused interventions, as opposed to some of the more explicitly focused interventions suggested in the focal article. We conceptualize explicitly focused interventions as those that deal directly and openly with race, diversity, or demographic differences. Below, we discuss three potential advantages of implicitly focused interventions.

## **Advantages of Implicitly Focused Interventions**

In general, organizational interventions should be most effective when specifically designed to address the primary antecedent or “root cause” of a problem (see Goldstein, 1991). Thus, one possible advantage of implicit over explicit interventions in the current situation is that of enhanced alignment with what is commonly understood to be a major “root cause” in this context: *implicit* biases. Although the focal article discusses implicit race biases, the interventions subsequently recommended are arguably more explicit than implicit in both their content and emphasis on race bias (see Table 1). If interventions are misaligned, we predict that they will be less effective for creating meaningful change.

A second possible advantage of implicitly focused interventions is that they carry a reduced risk for unintended negative consequences like backlash and stereotype threat; interventions that explicitly highlight racial stereotypes and intergroup conflict may ironically exacerbate existing

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**Table 1. Categorization of All Recommended Interventions From the Focal Article as Explicitly and/or Implicitly Focused on Race**

Description of intervention from focal article	Explicit	Implicit
<b>Personnel selection</b>		
create “more balance in terms of <i>racial similarity</i> between law enforcement and citizens . . . provide strategies to help attract, recruit, and screen more diverse job applicants” (p. 533)	X	
develop “selection procedures to predict officers’ <i>stereotype</i> activation and application, <i>prejudice</i> , and <i>discrimination</i> ” (p. 534)	X	
“develop screening procedures that specifically assess potential for <i>racial bias</i> ” (p. 534)	X	
<b>Training</b>		
“providing knowledge about <i>minority populations</i> , communication skills for interacting with minority populations, and awareness of personally held cultural assumptions” (p. 534)	X	
“determine whether there are . . . systematic differences in . . . reaction times and level of force toward citizens with varying <i>stereotypical racial features</i> ” through “a training simulation that places an applicant in an ambiguous situation” (p. 535)	X	X <sup>a</sup>
“include information about implicit <i>racial biases</i> and their impact on behavior” (p. 535)	X	
“conflict resolution with <i>racial bias</i> reduction strategies” including “an <i>emphasis on race bias</i> ” (p. 535)	X	
“identify other possible areas where . . . officer training is needed” . . . such that “the knowledge and skills taught in the police academy could be better aligned with those needed . . . on the job” (p. 536)		X
<b>Performance evaluation and management</b>		
“develop specific, observable, and measurable criteria with regard to displays of <i>racial bias</i> ” (p. 536)	X	
“develop and implement more ongoing, frequent feedback mechanisms” of interactions that “might seem routine,” but “might indicate <i>racial bias</i> ” (p. 537)	X	
“after-action reviews and short debriefing sessions” to “discuss the <i>demographic characteristics</i> of the citizen” (p. 537)	X	
“provide clear rules and guidelines about what types of behaviors are considered <i>biased</i> ” (p. 538)	X	
<b>Organizational climate</b>		
“providing individuals with information that <i>racial stereotyping</i> is not normative” . . . “ <i>condemn biases</i> , hate, and intolerance” . . . and build a “diversity climate” (p. 539)	X	
“capture . . . community members’ perceptions” . . . so “results from climate surveys could be used to develop interventions and change-management programs to reduce <i>racial bias</i> ” (p. 540)	X	

**Table 1. Continued**

Description of intervention from focal article	Explicit	Implicit
“expand leadership development programs . . . to include <i>racial sensitivity</i> modules” (p. 540)	X	
“community policing” . . . increasing “interaction between officers and the communities” (p. 541)		X
“develop and administer assessments” . . . examining responses for “ <i>different demographic groups</i> ” (p. 541)	X	

*Note.* Direct mentions of race, racial bias, discrimination, or demographics are italicized as indicators of explicit focus.

<sup>a</sup>This is categorized as implicit, assuming the intervention avoids directly addressing the race bias issue.

stereotypes and prejudices, placing further strain on the already tenuous relations between police officers and the Black community. Indeed, Duguid and Thomas-Hunt (2015) found that making people more aware of the prevalence of stereotyping (such as is commonly done in traditional diversity training) paradoxically *exacerbated* stereotypic attitudes about, and behavior toward, out-group members. Similarly, interventions that emphasize group stereotypes may increase the likelihood for stereotype threat, whereby people react in ways that are *more* rather than *less* stereotype consistent. For example, Goff, Steele, and Davies (2008) found that highlighting the “White racist stereotype” increased the tendency of White participants to distance themselves from Black conversation partners.

A third advantage of implicit interventions is that, because of their more subtle approach, implicit interventions may be more readily accepted and adopted by officers and police units compared with more explicit interventions. Notably, many of the focal article recommendations rely on police departments willingly “buying in” to the need for, and value of, such interventions. Unfortunately, it is likely that the organizations most plagued by racial bias will be those in which such prejudices are condoned and voluntary opt-ins to diversity interventions will be unlikely. We predict that implicit interventions, targeted toward general police efficacy, may be more influential in such cases. Consider, for example, two different possible training interventions: The first, titled “Diversity Training,” is explicitly race-focused in both its content (e.g., discussing race stereotypes, reviewing statistics on race inequities in society) and intended objectives (e.g., improving attitudes about racial minority groups), whereas the second, “Emotional Intelligence Strength-Training,” is aimed at improving trainees’ work-related interactions through increased awareness of, and ability to regulate, their own and

other people's emotions. Not only could the latter training program serve the same objectives intended by the traditional "Diversity Training" with regard to improving interracial attitudes and behaviors, it is arguably more palatable to employees who tend to resist more traditional diversity initiatives (see Holladay, Knight, Paige, & Quiñones, 2003). Noting the importance of pretraining "buy-in" from employees, Holladay and colleagues (2003) suggest that broadly framed training might reduce common negative responses to diversity training, including the tendency for trainees (particularly non-minority trainees) to feel targeted, accused, or even attacked through such training. To implement these implicitly focused interventions, only the higher ups in the organization need to buy in, rather than all of the participants, thus simplifying the number of barriers to effective implementation.

### **Implicit Antecedents: Cognitions, Affect, and Behaviors**

For decades, researchers have studied problems inherent to intergroup conflict. This research demonstrates that the issues experienced in Baltimore (and beyond) are not unique to racial conflict in the United States. In fact, intergroup conflicts throughout history share common themes of competition for scarce resources and power, in-group homophily, and perceptions of out-group homogeneity. Moreover, evidence suggests that humans easily form in-groups and out-groups based not only on demographic characteristics (like race) but also on seemingly trivial dimensions (e.g., Sherif & Sherif, 1953). This natural tendency to categorize people and objects into groups is not in and of itself "bad." Indeed, the categories and labels we create are incredibly beneficial in that they help us simplify and create order amid the chaos of our complex world. However, there are substantial corresponding costs to such "simplifications" about entire groups of people. For example, minimal group paradigms demonstrate that, even when people are randomly assigned to groups, they tend to form strong in-group preferences and strong out-group prejudices. In some cases, seemingly nonsensical group divisions can even result in violence (e.g., sports rivalries). Unfortunately, organizational interventions that are designed to highlight race biases may have the perverse effect of reinforcing faultlines between groups, thus encouraging a combative "us versus them" mindset.

Part of the reason implicit biases are so difficult to address is that they are, by definition, *implicit* and not part of individuals' conscious awareness. Even people who explicitly espouse egalitarian values often display implicit biases (Implicit Association Test [IAT]: e.g., Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Indeed, mere knowledge of a stereotype, regardless of whether one endorses it or not, is enough to elicit differences in responding to target groups. Especially in situations necessitating quick responding (e.g., IAT or shoot/don't shoot tasks), implicit biases can impact behavior. Given the

pervasiveness of racial tensions in the United States and the salience of these stereotypes (of Black persons and police officers), we can expect that implicit bias will play a large role in real-world interactions, above and beyond any explicit commitments to be more egalitarian and fair.

Unfortunately, implicit biases may be further fueled by explicit interventions. By continually emphasizing the intergroup nature of the problem, explicit interventions likely reinforce stereotypes (of both police officers and Black people) and prime our expectations and interpretations of members of both groups. These expectations, whether we are consciously aware of them or not, may have a powerful influence on how our interactions with out-group members unfold. For example, White individuals may be concerned about doing or saying something that is perceived as racist, whereas the Black individuals may be wary that their White counterpart is prejudiced against them. With the recent tension between the public and police, these expectations could manifest initially as subtle signals, such as defensive posturing, tense facial expressions, or fidgety behavior (e.g., Shelton, 2003). For instance, a citizen who is approached by a police officer whose hand is hovering over his/her service weapon might understandably feel threatened and respond with seemingly “suspicious” nervousness or agitation. In turn, those “suspicious” reactions act to heighten the officers’ sense of threat and further escalate the situation, increasing the likelihood of a physical altercation or conflict.

Research shows that interracial interactions are often stressful (Sawyer, Major, Casad, Townsend, & Mendes, 2012) and that stress may impair one’s decision making and reactions. For example, White participants perform more poorly on a Stroop task (considered to measure basic cognitive control) when the experimenter is Black versus White (see Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Because prejudice concerns may contribute to cognitive impairment (which would be especially relevant when officers and citizens are making split second decisions), continually reminding police officers of race biases may have an unintended backlash effect.

Even at a very basic level, intergroup conflict may impact what people see, hear, and perceive in their environment. For instance, in the classic “They Saw a Game” article, Hastorf and Cantril (1954) demonstrated that intergroup competition affected spectators’ perceptions of an intercollegiate football game. Spectators perceived more fouls and aggressive behavior on the part of their rival team. The authors suggest that the stimulus (the football game) was actually different for different spectators, depending on their allegiance; their perceptions were colored by a “social lens” based on their group membership and identity. It is important to recognize that social information (e.g., group membership and stereotype content knowledge) may be automatically and unintentionally affecting cognitive processes

(i.e., perception) that we prefer to think of as objective and absolute. Even small effects on these low-level perceptual processes, which result from implicit intergroup biases, may lead to hostile behaviors in the current conflict between the police and the Black public.

### **Recommended Implicit Interventions**

Due to concerns about the efficacy of explicit interventions, we suggest an approach that is not explicitly and singularly centered on race but rather one that focuses on a more global goal of improved policing. Adjusting superordinate goals may better address the implicit antecedents of the current conflict, thereby limiting the potential backlash from explicitly focusing on racial issues. We considered the recommendations from the focal article and will make suggestions of small changes that modify the interventions to be more implicitly focused. We advocate three interventions that we believe are the most promising: behavioral training in response to possible threats, conflict deescalation training, and positive intergroup contact.

First, the focal article mentions the benefits of training officers in shoot/don't shoot simulations. We would like to reemphasize that this training of police officers *does* seem to work. Indeed, trained officers tend to outperform community members on shoot/don't shoot tasks. Correll et al. (2007) found that officers displayed less race bias in setting shooting decision criteria than did the community member comparison group. Though officers may still display a response-time bias on their correct responses, training eliminates nearly all errors. We recommend increased emphasis on this type of behavioral training but without the explicit and sole emphasis on race. Targets in the task should include different races, genders, and ages. Through simulation and practice, officers will develop more control and more accurate responses when faced with threats in the real world.

Second, we advocate for training police officers in conflict deescalation tactics, which may be applied to many different situations (not only encounters with the Black public). As part of their duty to protect the public, police officers arguably bear more of the responsibility for maintaining control of a situation and preventing it from spiraling out of control. Similar to the shoot/don't shoot simulations, we encourage behavioral training that focuses on identifying and responding to subtle situational cues in interpersonal interactions. For example, officers could review video of themselves approaching different targets and diagnose what messages their posture, movement, or tone of voice might convey to the person on the other side of the encounter. As before, this training should not have an explicit race focus but should be focused on general improvements in police/public interactions. Through better awareness of subtle situational cues, including the emotions of those involved in the situation as well as one's own role in

influencing the situation, officers should be better equipped to prevent and deescalate conflict in encounters with the public (regardless of race). Thus, this form of training would approach the topic of interracial interactions as a *subset* of, rather than the sole objective of, a broader set of communication and conflict management skills (see Holladay et al., 2003).

Last, though initial and sporadic interracial interactions often prove to be stressful and costly, there is good reason to expect that increased intergroup contact will improve relations (e.g., Pettigrew & Trope, 2006). Another broad, not race-specific, intervention may be to increase instances of positive contact between police officers and the public. Through community service outreach and neighborhood events, a rehumanizing effect may occur. For example, recent viral videos of police officers dancing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HBkofITY8M> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS3WL2cPABY>) or playing basketball (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUJY82svsog>) with the public have had powerful, if only momentary, improvements in how police are perceived. Making positive contact more common and normative may begin to change the implicit expectations and prejudices of both police and Black citizens. Though this change would occur slowly, it would address the automatic, implicit reactions that seem to be fueling much of the current conflict, hopefully resulting in long-term change.

### Summary

In sum, we agree with the overarching point of the focal article and believe I-O psychologists have the potential to positively impact the current state of police–race relations. At the same time, we caution against reliance on interventions that are explicit or “heavy-handed” with regard to the issue of race. Though this may seem like a strange suggestion, it is grounded in our understanding that the current problem is largely rooted in implicit causes. As such, we advocate for interventions that are well-aligned with the implicit antecedents—those that attempt change through more subtle means. Though taking a direct approach would seem to be more efficient, the research reviewed here suggests that misaligned interventions may ultimately be costly, heightening (rather than reducing) the perceived threat and creating the potential for perverse backlash effects. As this is an extremely important issue, with lives at stake, we encourage I-O psychologists to move forward both with enthusiasm and caution.

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## A Simple Solution to Policing Problems: Women!

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Ruggs et al. (2016) describe paths through which industrial–organizational (I-O) psychology can make a dent in the ongoing policing problems in the United States. These paths include traditional I-O areas such as improved selection models, increased training, and changed organizational climates. However, there might be one fairly straightforward way in which police organizations can quickly reduce use-of-force problems: women. Because Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prevents selection based on sex, police departments obviously cannot hire women just because they are women. But po-

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