

COMMENTARY

# Mindfulness complements sexual harassment and racial discrimination training by counteracting implicit gender and race biases

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Hayes et al. (2020) rightfully pointed out that although sexual harassment and racial discrimination training programs generally promote declarative knowledge and conscious attitudes against mistreatment of people based on gender or race, they produce little positive change in enacted behaviors, posing a grand challenge for such training. I contend that implicit (unconscious) bias related to gender and race is a key culprit behind harassing and discriminatory behaviors; yet, as Hayes et al. alluded to, implicit bias has been largely ineffectively tackled in extant training. Whereas conscious attitudes that people are able to self-report can be altered by traditional training, implicit biases—automatic negative attitudes people hold against someone on the ground of gender or race (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Cortina, 2008)—are difficult to override, as they are firmly ingrained in the mind and operate outside conscious awareness and control. Indeed, implicit gender and racial biases remain prevalent (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Cortina, 2008) and have been shown to more strongly predict discriminatory behaviors than do conscious attitudes (e.g., Greenwald et al., 2009). Overcoming implicit biases, therefore, is at the forefront of combating sexual harassment and racial discrimination. I extend the conversation in the focal article by Hayes et al. and argue for the beneficial role of mindfulness in counteracting implicit gender and racial biases, and pertinent confirmation bias, thereby enhancing the capacity of sexual harassment and racial discrimination training to effect desirable behavioral change. I further discuss how organizational contexts may impact the efficacy of mindfulness in combating implicit gender and race biases.

## What do we know and not know about mindfulness?

Rooted in the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is a state of consciousness characterized by receptive awareness of and attention to present moment experiences without judgment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness was initially brought into the secular domain to help people with stress and health challenges (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), but its benefits have well extended to the work sphere, ranging from decreased burnout (e.g., Roeser et al., 2013) to increased job satisfaction (e.g., Hülsheger et al., 2013) and performance (e.g., Dane & Brummel, 2014).

Nonetheless, scarce attention has been devoted to the intersection of mindfulness with sexual harassment and racial discrimination; whereas some research focuses on how mindfulness helps victims cope with sexual assault (e.g., Daigneault et al., 2016) and racial discrimination (Zapolski et al., 2019), little is known regarding whether and how mindfulness may keep perpetrators from engaging in mistreatment of target individuals (for an exception, see Lueke & Gibson, 2016).

## **Mindfulness counteracts implicit gender and race biases**

I posit that mindfulness forestalls mistreatment of target individuals by counteracting implicit biases related to gender and race. Gender and racial biases such as sexism and racism are prejudiced attitudes toward people in certain gender and race groups (often women and ethnic minorities), characterized by stereotyped beliefs about, and negative feelings toward, target group members, as well as a tendency to act negatively against them (Cortina, 2008). Gender and racial biases are a function of cognitive evaluation (e.g., stereotypes), affective reaction (e.g., antipathy, contempt), and behavioral tendency (e.g., impulse to mistreat). When such biases occur in the implicit form, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes operate automatically, unconsciously, and habitually. As I discuss below, mindfulness effectively intervenes in these automatic processes and thus overcomes implicit gender and racial biases.

### ***Mindfulness disrupts stereotyped beliefs about target individuals***

Implicit stereotypes play a pernicious role in the occurrence of sexual harassment and racial discrimination. Stereotyping is a mental process in which people associate learned characteristics of a social category with individuals in that category. For example, career women and Black professionals tend to be perceived as highly competent but lacking warmth (Cortina, 2008; Glick & Fiske, 2001). People often fall prey to the implicit form of stereotypes, wherein they draw on past experience and memory to evoke automatic associations and judgments about individuals in a social group (e.g., women and people of color) and evade the effortful endeavor to gather details of the specific individual they presently encounter. Implicit stereotyping has become “a mindless habit” (Weiten et al., 2015, p. 214), operating in an evaluative mode of information processing that is detached from the present experience.

Mindfulness counteracts implicit stereotypes of gender and race, as it brings awareness and attention to the present-moment experience in a nonjudgmental stance (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Mindfulness features an experiential mode of processing (Brown et al., 2007), in which people have heightened awareness of ongoing experiences and notice the full spectrum of details that emerge as they encounter an individual from a social group. As people notice the gender- and race-related attributes of the individual, mindful and nonjudgmental awareness disrupts automatic associations about gender and race that people would otherwise habitually evoke. Mindfulness facilitates a receptive perception of the individual’s attributes as an objective reality, without applying concepts, memories, judgments, or cognitive filters to the attributes (Brown et al., 2007). As Shapiro and colleagues (2006) noted, mindfulness enables people to “experience what *is* instead of a commentary or story about what is” (p. 379, italics in original). For example, rather than automatically viewing a female employee who asks for a promotion as “aggressive” solely based on gender, or a minority applicant as “incompetent” solely based on race, people in a mindful state are able to form unprejudiced perceptions of the individuals and treat them impartially. Consistent with this notion, research has shown that a brief mindfulness meditation decreases implicit bias by weakening race-related stereotypes (Lueke & Gibson, 2015).

### ***Mindfulness curbs negative affective reactions toward target individuals***

People who hold implicit gender and race biases tend to have negative affective reactions—such as contempt, antipathy, and hostility—toward target individuals (Cortina, 2008). Social categorization is an innate process in which people mentally place individuals into categories based on demographic attributes such as gender and race (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Whereas people often cast favorable views toward ingroup members, they tend to form pejorative affective reactions toward outgroup members in a different gender or race category (Hewstone et al., 2002), which, in large part, underlies discriminatory behaviors toward the outgroup.

Mindfulness, by its very nature, is nonreactive consciousness; it sustains an objective view of present experiences in a receptive manner (Brown & Ryan, 2003). People in a mindful state tend to view different social categories more neutrally, rather than habitually reacting to the mental demarcation of *us* versus *them*. When negative feelings toward the outgroup arise, mindfulness helps people take notice of such feelings in an observer stance, viewing them as an ongoing stream of fleeting objects in the mind and without immersing themselves in the content or sensation of the feelings (Glomb et al., 2011). As Brown and colleagues (2007) noted, a mindful state resembles a polished mirror that simply reflects thoughts and emotions passing before it. Research has shown the effect of mindfulness in reducing emotional reactivity (Good et al., 2016) and promoting mental calmness (Desbordes et al., 2015). Mindfulness therefore is expected to counteract implicit gender and race biases by overriding negative affective reactions toward target individuals.

### ***Mindfulness overcomes ill impulse toward target individuals***

Implicit gender and race biases fuel the impulse to mistreat target individuals. The impulse is automatic, habitual, eludes conscious awareness, and squarely effects harassing and discriminatory behaviors. The automatic impulse comes in play covertly such that “[e]mployees may be unaware of their tendencies to treat persons from minority communities unfairly” (Hayes et al., 2020, p. 121).

Mindfulness counteracts the automatic impulse to mistreat target individuals based on gender and race, as mindfulness enables the conscious detection of the ill impulse and promotes self-regulation of behaviors. Mindful awareness registers moment-to-moment experiences, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions on the mental “radar,” and takes notice of strong stimuli as they arise (Brown et al., 2007). Mindfulness enhances the detection of the psychological and physiological urge to act negatively toward target individuals. Bringing the ill impulse to conscious awareness is a key step of preventing mistreatment; mindful awareness not only disrupts the automatic, undesirable impulse–action association (Brown et al., 2007) but also enhances the mental capacity to control one’s own behavior and devise “choiceful” responses (Glomb et al., 2011). For example, although implicit bias people unintentionally hold may prompt the impulse to act discriminatorily toward others based on gender and race, mindful awareness enables people to notice the impulse without acting upon it and instead take a pause to come up with desirable responses. In support of this argument, research has shown that dispositional mindfulness is positively related to self-control (Deng et al., 2019), and mindfulness meditation promotes flexible responding in interpersonal encounters at work (Glomb et al., 2011).

### **Mindfulness counteracts confirmation bias related to gender and race**

Confirmation bias refers to people’s tendency to prefer information that supports their existing viewpoints compared to information that contradicts them (Frey, 1986). Confirmation bias is germane to the discussion, as people who hold implicit bias tend to search for and interpret supporting evidence for their existing bias and dismiss conflicting evidence. For example, supervisors holding gender bias may view a female employee’s request for flextime as confirming evidence of her lack of commitment to work while ignoring her track record of performance. Service employees who are racially biased may view a muscular Black man as aggressive but disregard his courteous demeanor in the store.

Mindfulness counteracts confirmation bias because mindfulness allows for attention to the totality of characteristics of target individuals and disrupts judgment of whether the characteristics are congruent or conflicting with one’s existing view. Following the above examples, mindful supervisors will take notice of the employee’s scheduling request alongside her performance information, and mindful employees will be aware of the customer’s physical attributes as well as his behaviors. In a mindful state, the characteristics of target individuals are simply neutral objects on

one's mental "radar" rather than potent triggers that would otherwise activate preconceived notions or biased judgments related to gender or race. Sexual harassment and racial discrimination training may incorporate activities such as focused breathing and sitting meditation to foster mindful, nonjudgmental awareness. Importantly, the cultivation of mindfulness should go beyond training per se to effect on-the-job behavioral change. When employees encounter someone at work, gender or race characteristics of the individual should cue employees to bring mindful awareness at the moment to notice, and be open to, the entirety of information about the individual, without filtering the information through biased views. The key to behavioral change is for employees to be ready to evoke mindful, nonjudgmental awareness when it is called for in work situations (Hafenbrack, 2017).

### Mindfulness within organizational contexts

The role of mindfulness in combating sexual harassment and racial discrimination should be considered within the context of an organization. Whereas mindfulness counteracts implicit gender and race biases by overcoming stereotyped cognition, negative affect, and malicious impulse toward target individuals, mindfulness also promotes "relatively more thorough attention to the external environment" (Herndon, 2008, p. 33). It is possible that the effect of mindfulness may be amplified or dampened in a work setting to the extent that employees attune themselves to workplace values and norms. In organizational contexts where ethical standards are strongly upheld and discriminatory behaviors are consistently sanctioned, mindfulness is likely to enhance employees' awareness of the intolerance of negative behaviors in the environment, which reinforces the role of mindfulness against gender- and race-based mistreatment. In contrast, in work settings where ambient sexual harassment or racial discrimination prevails, mindful employees are likely to notice the group norm and follow suit, which can undermine the effect of mindfulness. In this sense, mindfulness per se may not be the antidote to mistreatment. Rather, enforceable organizational policies and strong leadership against harassment and discrimination are crucial, as they aid in the creation of a conducive environment for mindfulness to neutralize gender- and race-based mistreatment.

### Conclusion

I contend that mindfulness is an important complement to sexual harassment and racial discrimination training by counteracting implicit gender and race biases. Mindful nonjudgmental awareness overcomes stereotyped beliefs, negative feelings, and ill impulse toward target individuals and overrides confirmation bias related to gender and race. Organizations nonetheless should strive to create a work environment aligned against mistreatment, thereby allowing mindfulness to realize its fullest potential.

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