

Unionists waking up to bias



By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

I'm racially biased. Or at least the Harvard Implicit Bias test says I am. In the conscious part of the test, I was asked questions like whether I think blacks and whites are equally worthy, and I said yes. But I flunked the subconscious part of the test. Basically it measures your reaction time when you're asked to associate black or white faces with negative or positive words. Take it your-

self, online, at bit.ly/1m808ph. You may be surprised, and possibly disturbed. Like many other white people, I had a measurably faster reaction time when the association was between a black face and a negative word. And I'm not happy about that.

For me, the test was preparation for a day-long training for union staff led by Barbara Diamond, a Portland labor lawyer who's won countless cases for unions over the years.

Since 2014, she has made a series of short films and organized a dozen trainings for union staff or legal professionals.

The films and trainings aren't just about race. They look at attitudes about gender and sexual orientation, perceived foreign-ness, and physical and mental disability. If they make participants uncomfortable, that may be because we've all got work to do.

Race might be the clearest example. In our society, a ré-

sumé with a black-sounding name is 50 percent less likely to get a call back from an employer ... black drivers are twice as likely to be pulled over by police, and black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated ... and pediatricians are less likely to prescribe painkillers to black children. And it may be that none of the individual decisions that contribute to those disparate results were made by people who were consciously racist.

That's where the "implicit bias" theory comes in. According to the theory, unconscious racial preferences like mine are producing real-world disparate impacts. And if that's true, then just outlawing obvious racial discrimination isn't going to be enough to achieve the equitable society that most of us say we want.

In her films, Diamond interviews union members about their experiences of "microaggressions." Microaggressions are mostly unintentional slights, snubs, or insults directed at people based on their membership in a disenfranchised group. For example, a black person will hear, "I don't see you as black," and that's

supposed to be a compliment. Or a native Oregonian with Asian features might be told she speaks very good English.

The May 12 training I attended got very emotional at times for the dozens of union staff who attended. Some white union staffers said they felt guilty, or thought that they were supposed to feel guilty.

"I think it's normal for people who are diving into this stuff to feel a moment of guilt," Diamond told me afterward, "because you realize, 'I have unearned privilege, and I've had an easier time with my life.' The problem with guilt is if you're stuck there, you're looking at yourself. You're thinking about your own feelings, when what you really need to be thinking about is the affect of your actions and how you can show up to change things."

"I walked away from the training thinking maybe I can be a little more conscientious, so I don't inadvertently make someone feel uncomfortable," says UFCW Local 555 representative Sam Gillispie. "As union reps, if we can make one individual less uncomfortable by our awareness and sensitivity, that's a good thing."

5 questions for anti-bias trainer Barbara Diamond

Why have you been making films and organizing trainings about microaggressions and implicit bias? After 30 years of doing legal work and working in the labor union movement — which I think of as being part of the civil rights movement — I realized we weren't as far along as I thought we'd be. We have a lot of the same issues — gender equity, racism. I started educating myself and started realizing that I wanted to do something that might affect people in the labor movement on a broader scale. I felt like there was a role for me especially as a white person to step up to the plate and start working on issues like this.

Do the trainings make a difference? I think they've enabled union staff and leaders to represent members in a more effective way. I trained a union staff person and within a year they were having to advocate for a transgender member who was being mistreated



by management. The seminars have also led to proposals at the bargaining table to protect transgender rights.

What's a microaggression? It's typically an unconscious slight or subtle snub, between a member of an empowered group and a member of a disempowered group. Some people call it death by a thousand cuts. It's a tiny distancing communication of some kind or another.

Why are we worrying about paper cuts when people are still losing limbs? Why sweat the small stuff when there's so much unsolved big stuff, like the statistics on disparate treatment? I like to think of microaggressions as the tip of iceberg that is implicit bias. I view implicit bias as the cause of those statistics. Microaggressions are the part of implicit bias that's visible because they're above the water line. I doubt that the pediatrician who dispenses less pain medicine to an African-American child realizes that's what he's doing. If you're committing a microaggression, it means that your implicit bias is unchecked, because if you were aware and studied and worked to become aware of your unconscious bias, you wouldn't say or do those things.

Some of the terminology at your training sounds very academic, like intersectionality, cisgender, affirming

language, micro-invalidation. Is this a college-educated middle-class attempt to police the thoughts, words or behavior of working class people? If you believe that, you'd have to think that sexual harassment is also a classist attack. Until we developed a vocabulary and a way of understanding sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, we didn't even have the concept of sexual harassment. You can't combat it until you have a vocabulary to describe it. Microaggression theory is developing a vocabulary. It was developed in the counseling and teaching arena to try to explain to white people who are counselors and teachers and doctors how to relate to a patient who is different.

In your films, black people talk about white people touching their hair, and a woman in a wheelchair recounts being asked by a stranger if she's able to have

sex. Are these just examples of really bad manners? This is about bias; you really can't view it as just about manners. Some people will view this as being about "Don't hurt people's feelings by using words that might hurt them." If that's all people bring away from it and they change their behavior, then they'll have to be constantly updated about the list of what's appropriate and what's not. They're going to see it as a behavioral thing. I view this as a process of listening. That's why I made the films: I want people to listen to the voices of people who are from these different communities whose voices are generally not heard.

— Don McIntosh

ONLINE EXTRA

Watch trailers for Diamond's films on race, gender, and disability at diamondlaw.org/film-trailers. Her film on race is viewable in its entirety at youtu.be/ayBISQxxKWM.