

Diversity Training is Unscientific, and Divisive

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In an uplifting inaugural address, newly elected President Joe Biden promised to give his all to unite the nation. Yet later that day, Biden signed an executive order re-imposing divisive diversity training on federal agencies, contractors, and recipients of federal funding—which the previous administration had suspended.¹

Like most social scientists, we know that when political regimes change, new leaders engage in grand displays of political symbolism by attempting to undo executive orders of the previous administration. Trump did the same thing to former president Obama's policies in his first days in office.

Yet symbolism and good intentions are no match for painful realities, or the historical lessons learned from programmatic initiatives in the past. These observations inform us that good science must be prioritized over public relations. The Trump administration's executive order attempting to limit diversity training in the U.S. government was by and large on the side of science—President Biden's undoing of that policy is not.

Critics of Trump's ban assert that it advanced the “dangerous cause of white supremacy and disinformation.” To supporters of Biden's actions, his revocation moves the country closer to “grappling honestly with implicit bias, racism and sexism in this country.”²

We have seen the results of diversity training and related approaches during many decades in academia, reviewing relevant literature and actively participating in many decades of fieldwork in schools and other public

1 Robert Maranto, Craig Frisby, “Biden starts on the wrong foot: diversity training divides rather than unites,” *The Hill*, January 28, 2021.

2 A. Olson, “Biden revokes Trump ban on some diversity training addressing white privilege, systemic racism,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 21, 2021.

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bureaucracies. What have we (and countless others) learned? To state the matter bluntly: diversity programs usually do not work, and they often result in negative unintended consequences that are far worse than the problems that such programs were originally designed to address.

The justification for diversity training programs is rooted in two fundamental sources. The first are trendy theories of white wickedness/minority victimhood that thrive in academia—e.g., “implicit bias,”³ “hidden racism,”⁴ “aversive racism,”⁵ “reasonable racism,”⁶ “benign bigotry,”⁷ “symbolic racism,”⁸ “unconscious bias,”⁹ “everyday bias,”¹⁰ and “silent racism,”¹¹—to name only a few.

The second is the frustration of civil rights groups over inequities within education,¹² employment inequalities,¹³ and workplace discrimination.¹⁴

Leaving aside whether some of these concerns are valid—and many are overstated—the science shows that diversity training is not the right solution. As far back as 1997, researchers Helen Hemphill and Ray Haines conducted discussions with more than 500 organizational executives, managers, and directors; held conversations with more than 100 diversity consultants and trainers; conducted in-depth searches of the literature on diversity in the workforce; and examined media coverage on diversity issues over a five-year span. Their research resulted in eleven conclusions, which they characterized as “overwhelming” in their consistency:¹⁵

1. Participants in diversity-training workshops found them to be divisive, disturbing, and counterproductive;

3 E. Beeghly, A. Madva, eds., *An Introduction to Implicit Bias: Knowledge, Justice, and the Social Mind* (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

4 D. Lefkowitz, A.J. Nino Amato, *Today's Hidden Racism: A Polite Apartheid* (Madison, WI: Foundation to End Polite Apartheid, 2001).

5 PsycholoGenie, “Understanding the Psychology Behind Aversive Racism,” <https://psychologenie.com/understanding-psychology-behind-aversive-racism>.

6 J.D. Armour, *Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism: The Hidden Costs of Being Black in America* (*Critical America*, 32) (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

7 K.J. Anderson, *Benign Bigotry: The Psychology of Subtle Prejudice* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8 “Symbolic racism,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic_racism.

9 T.A. Benson, S.E. Flarman, G.E. Singleton (Foreword), *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2019).

10 H.J. Ross, *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives* (London: Roman & Littlefield, 2014).

11 B. Trepagnier, *Silent Racism: How Well-Meaning White People Perpetuate the Racial Divide* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

12 K. Bhopal, U. Maylor, eds., *Educational Inequalities: Difference and Diversity in Schools and Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

13 C. E. Weller, “African Americans Face Systematic Obstacles to Getting Good Jobs,” Center for American Progress, December 5, 2019.

14 “Discrimination and Harassment in the Workplace,” National Conference of State Legislatures, March 18, 2019, <https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/employment-discrimination.aspx>.

15 H. Hemphill, R. Haines, *Discrimination, Harassment, and the Failure of Diversity Training: What to Do Now* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1997).

2. Diversity trainers were often inexperienced and ineffective;
3. Minority groups' expectations were raised—and then disappointed;
4. White males were stereotyped and blamed;
5. There was reverse discrimination and reverse stereotyping, (particularly against low income whites);
6. A nationwide backlash occurred against diversity-training programs;
7. Sensitive and personal issues were brought out in hostile public settings;
8. Workers experienced unnecessary anxiety and emotional upheaval;
9. Distrust between men and women increased;
10. Many workers were resistant to attending further diversity training programs;
11. Little or no transfer of learning took place from teaching about differences to changing discriminatory and harassing behaviors in the workplace.

In a recent podcast, “Why do diversity programs fail (and how to make them work),” Harvard Sociology Professor Frank Dobbin reports that taken as a whole, more than 1,000 studies indicate that popular diversity interventions tend to do nothing, or can even be counterproductive.¹⁶ Similarly, in his essay, “Diversity is Important. Diversity related training is terrible,” Columbia University’s Musa al-Gharbi summarized the extant research.¹⁷ Al-Gharbi reports that naturally, no one should be surprised that diversity training leads participants of such training to give the socially desirable answers to surveys taken post-training. In the long term, however, most diversity training divides more than it unites, reinforces stereotypes, and worsens intergroup relations while failing to increase diversity in leadership or enhance productivity. It also sometimes leads to retaliatory lawsuits.¹⁸

Perhaps most strikingly, many of those tasked with implementing diversity training programs have long suspected they were ineffective.¹⁹ Recall that the Minneapolis Police Department mandated diversity training *before* one of its officers knelt on the neck of George Floyd.²⁰

16 Y. Mounk, “Why Do Diversity Programs Fail? (And How to Make them Work),” *Persuasion*, August 3, 2020.

17 M. al-Gharbi, “Diversity is Important. Diversity-Related Training is Terrible,” *Minding the Campus*, November 6, 2020.

18 J. Molina, “Group Files Another Lawsuit Against Santa Barbara School District Over Cultural Proficiency Training,” *Noozhawk*, April 9, 2019.

19 S. Satel, S.O. Lilienfeld, “Questionable Psychological Science Won’t Change Police,” *National Review*, August 3, 2020; “al-Gharbi, “Diversity is Important.”

20 R. Maranto, “Don’t Go for Woke: Microaggressions are Unscientific,” *Minding the Campus*, October 29, 2020.

Likewise, the New York Police Department implemented an implicit bias training program in 2018 to reduce excessive amounts of force against African American suspects and the use of racial profiling to stop and arrest African Americans at greater rates. After the NYPD spent \$5.5 million, researchers found that such training had absolutely no effect on officer behavior. Broadening this discussion from the specific to the general, we find that many other police departments around the country have found implicit bias training to be ineffective.²¹ In the UK, implicit bias training for civil servants is scheduled to be abandoned due to its poor quality and ineffectiveness.

Why Does Anyone Do Diversity Training?

One reason might be the genuine intention to improve intergroup relations on the part of organizational leaders who are sincerely well-meaning. Yet self-interest may play a greater role. Diversity training has long been a multi-billion dollar industry which often profits from bias incidents.²² If some employee says or does something offensive, government or corporate headquarters brings in diversity trainers to improve the optics and give the appearance of doing something.²³ In the higher education sector, training diversity trainers is itself a lucrative profit center.²⁴

Once established as “best practices,” activities like diversity training take on a bureaucratic life of their own. No matter how ineffective it is, corporate leaders take greater risks from ditching diversity training and being charged with bigotry or a lack of professionalism than from preserving it and keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Perhaps the biggest tragedy of all is that diversity training takes money and attention away from tactics that really can improve intergroup understanding. Sociologists Charles Moskos and John Sibley Butler offer the best guide to those tactics in their classic *All That We Can Be: Black Leadership and Racial Integration the Army Way*.²⁵ Key to the Army’s success is having a common mission, clear

21 “We asked 155 police departments about their racial bias training. Here’s what they told us,” CBS News, August 7, 2019, at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/racial-bias-training-de-escalation-training-policing-in-america/>

22 P. Newkirk, “Diversity Has Become a Booming Business. So Where Are the Results?” *Time*, October 10, 2019.

23 J. Calfas, “Starbucks Is Closing All Its U.S. Stores for Diversity Training Day. Experts Say That’s Not Enough,” *Time*, May 28, 2018.

24 C. F. Lehman, “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo got rich peddling ‘white fragility,’” *Washington Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020.

25 C. Moskos, J.S. Butler, *All That WE Can Be: Black Leadership And Racial Integration The Army Way* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996).

merit systems, and having black and white recruits of roughly equal talent in order to overcome rather than reinforce racial stereotypes.

Of course for some, merit is now considered a white supremacist idea. Moreover, as Thomas Sowell shows in *Charter Schools and their Enemies*,²⁶ the non-bureaucratic schools and other institutions most able to build black talent are, alas, anathema to the left (which functionally dominates racial matters in this country).

We are not naïve enough to think that activist political groups would be persuaded by any of the arguments presented in this essay. For many, the social justice paradigm has become a religion, and an uncharitable one at that. Faith in societal utopias is unlikely to yield to hard and cold facts. Yet others, whether they be academics or not, know these things we have discussed to be painfully true from eye-opening experience. Unfortunately, given the direction of the current political climate, America will also have to learn these lessons the hard way.

26 T. Sowell, *Charter Schools and Their Enemies* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).