

Implicit bias and the cultivation of racial harmony

Tackling implicit bias starts from a young age. The review of Character and Citizenship Education should draw on research to see how to improve education against bias.

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July 21 is Racial Harmony Day, a day set aside by the Ministry of Education since 1997 to remind students of the 1964 race riots in Singapore and the importance of racial harmony for our society.

The setting aside of this day is one of the many government and civic initiatives over the years to promote racial harmony. They appear to have effect. The Institute of Policy Studies conducted a poll last year, which showed that Singaporeans have better attitudes towards races other than their own. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth's 2019 Social Pulse Survey yielded similar findings.

Yet, the underlying tensions are always there. I am often reminded of it when I browse the comments section of the citizen journalism website Stomp. Whenever an article is about a person's misbehaviour and the person is identified as someone from a minority race in an accompanying photograph, I will inevitably come across racist comments.

Racial biases can be explicit or implicit. While we are aware of and can control our expressions of explicit biases, we are neither aware of, nor can we consciously control, our implicit biases. Implicit biases are thus difficult to observe and remove. Instead they are inferred by psychologists through specialised means like questionnaires, observation of subtle behaviours like blinking and eye contact, or by the Implicit Association Test, which measures the time taken for people to categorise racially identifiable faces and positive or negative words.

Despite being difficult to detect, implicit biases have significant bearing on racial harmony in a society. Social psychologists have posited that they influence our motivation to reason about actions, our perception of whether someone is friendly or not, and our interpretation of others' words and actions. These can have the downstream consequences of aggravating the level of suspicion and misunderstanding between people of different races in society. Racial biases are hardwired in

young children from the time they become cognitively aware of other people. Studies have shown toddlers to be biased in favour of people of their own ethnicity. The bias increases until schoolgoing age, and then something curious happens.

Explicit bias decreases but implicit bias remains the same. Researchers speculate that this is because social norms in school and society block students' conspicuous conscious expressions of racial prejudice, while their implicit racial biases go under society's radar.

What could be done to mitigate implicit racial biases in growing up? Here are five points from social psychology that can help.

INTRINSIC GOALS

Educational psychologist Bart Duriez conducted a study on adolescents that suggests parental encouragement of intrinsic goals can lessen adolescent racial and cultural biases.

Extrinsic goals are goals aimed at obtaining conspicuous signs of success like social status, good looks or wealth. Intrinsic goals are goals aimed at obtaining personal satisfaction in assisting others, learning a skill or forging good relationships.

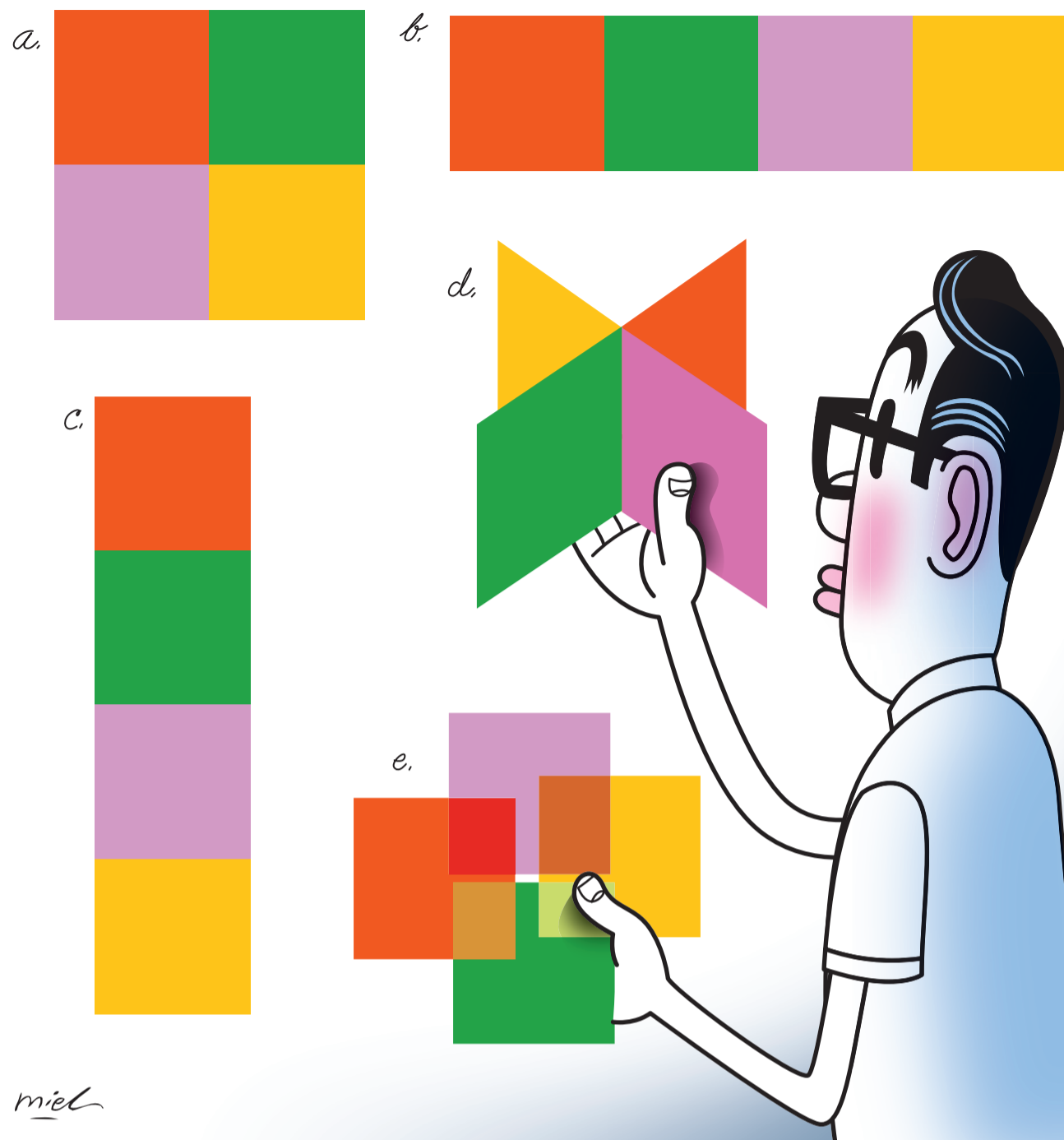
The basic idea is that extrinsic goals, if pursued at the expense of intrinsic goals, will lead an adolescent to "experience other people as competitors and potential hazards to their own welfare", resulting in lowered empathy towards others, which Dr Duriez found in another study to correlate negatively with prejudice.

FEELINGS OF SECURITY

Dr Duriez's study also suggests that having parents who support feelings of self-expression and security results in adolescents having less feelings of aggression against those who go against their norms. This in turn can complement the good effects of pursuing intrinsic goals, for confident and secure youth will be less likely to perceive outgroup members as threats.

INTERGROUP CONTACT

Many studies suggest that intergroup contact can reduce racial bias in the participants. Developmental psychologist



Frances Aboud and her collaborators call friendship the "gold standard for contact". Other researchers have found that being friends with someone is usually accompanied with respecting that person.

Because friendship is unlikely to develop as a matter of intentional pedagogical cultivation, "natural exposures" in which interactions are chosen by the participants in a multiracial environment are often more effective than random assignments to groups. Interestingly, researchers have also found that the mere knowledge of intergroup friendships can mitigate racial bias.

MORAL REASONING

Child psychologist Adam Rutland and his colleagues distinguish between two types of interests that a child has: interests of the group to which she/he belongs and moral interests. These interests can conflict because the prescriptions of moral principles like equality and fairness can go against group norms.

Children who learn how to reason with moral principles that apply to human beings in general rather than to specific groups can override reasoning based on racial stereotypes.

INCLUSIVE COMMON IDENTITIES

The need to identify with one's group, to be accepted by its authority figures and peers, can lead one to conform to group norms. The group norms that

constitute a group's common identity is thus an important factor in influencing one's attitudes towards people of other groups. Dr Rutland and colleagues posit that concerns about how oneself is viewed by one's group "should lead to positive attitudes towards outgroups, if (potentially inclusive) moral principles like equality and fairness are essential to the group identity".

According to then Education Minister Ong Ye Kung at this year's Committee of Supply (COS) debates, the Ministry of Education's Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum is undergoing review and changes will be rolled out from next year.

What improvements to the current 2014 CCE curriculum can research on implicit bias suggest? First, primary school CCE should be front-loaded with skills, values and attitudes rather than knowledge.

Already at Primary 1 and 2, pupils should be exposed to teaching strategies like storytelling and putting oneself in another's shoes to inculcate inclusive dispositions like empathy, humility and respect for others. Early childhood biases can be mitigated by such dispositions rather than knowledge of cultural and religious practices.

Second, students should be taught to negotiate potential conflicts between the CCE domains of self and community. Students come to school with familial and

other group norms already embedded in their sense of identity. When identity perpetuating values like viewing oneself positively and respecting oneself are taught without reference to community values, they can promote aggressive ways of protecting one's identity.

Third, the moral values of respect and fairness can be powerfully inculcated by teaching students to stand up against bullying.

According to Minister Ong at the COS debates, "our children need to learn to stand up against discrimination, against bullying – of all kinds, and regardless of whom the victim is".

To the extent that the revisions to the CCE curriculum include many iterations of this lesson, their effect will be the entrenching of inclusive moral norms in students' identities in opposition to those group norms that threaten racial harmony.

Educating for racial harmony does not write on a blank slate because our brains are hardwired with bias. The transfer of knowledge of historical and current racial incidents and the discussion of racially sensitive issues are well complemented by deeper strategies like the listed ones above, that mitigate implicit racial bias.

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