

Do Diversity Training Programs Work?

Creating a Culture of Inclusion through Scientific Reasoning

BY MONA SUE WEISSMARK

WITH THE RISE OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER (BLM) movement in 2020, government agencies, corporations, and universities and colleges began scrambling to show their support by instituting diversity and racial sensitivity training programs, not dissimilar to what Starbucks did in 2018 when they closed 8,000 stores to put 175,000 employees through an “anti-bias” training program in response to the media frenzy after two African American men were arrested while waiting for a business meeting to begin there.

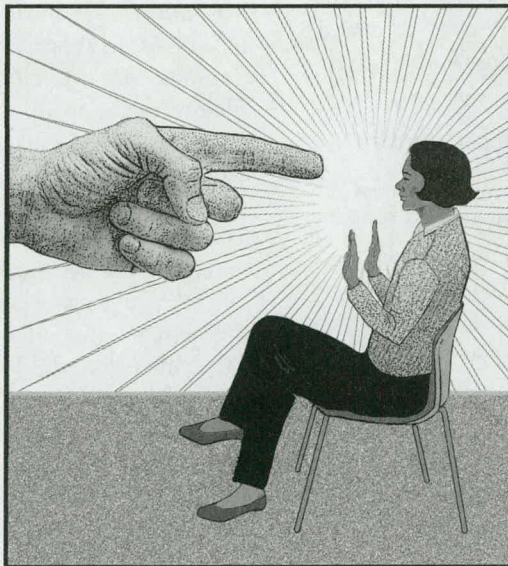
Underlying such programs is the belief in the value of diversity and inclusion, and many organizations have taken steps to implement diversity training programs that subtly insist on ideological conformity and often silence open discussions. Neither measure is inclusive. The seemingly noble intention of encouraging inclusion is often subverted by agenda-driven trainings that leave little space for different perspectives or nuanced conversations. This approach contradicts the very essence of the values they are trying to promote.

Most diversity and racial sensitivity training programs are not up to the task of developing truly inclusive environments because they do not foster psychological safety among their participants. I learned this the hard way at Harvard where, as a clinical and social psychologist, I brought adult children of Holocaust survivors to-

gether face-to-face with adult children of Nazis, as well as the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of African American slaves and slave holders, I documented the results in my 2004 book *Justice Matters* (made into a documentary in 2006) and more recently in my 2020 book *The Science of Diversity*.

The preponderance of diversity trainings begin with the assumption that we need to eliminate bias and prejudice by purging our “wrong” beliefs, such as those related to historical injustices, power differentials, race and gender differences, and so forth. The contentiousness of this methodology has taken center stage in both the private and political arenas. President Trump recently ordered the heads of federal agencies to cease and desist from offering such trainings, noting that they “engender division and resentment within the Federal workforce.” By contrast, universities and corporations are actively ramping up their diversity and racial sensitivity programs.

A review of the research on diversity and racial sensitivity programs shows that thousands of diversity intervention programs over 50 years have been ineffectual in removing bias and prejudice from people. Telling people that they are biased and need to attend a mandatory antibias training, or a racial sensitivity program can activate bias rather than stamp it out. If people feel forced to accept an authority’s agenda, they



may do the opposite to assert their autonomy.

In order to comprehend the complexities of our biases, it is necessary to understand their biological, neurological and psychological underpinnings. Commanding people to get rid of biases that are deeply rooted in their personal memories and histories is akin to asking them to shed their very legacies and identities.

Moreover, telling people to get rid of their biases is apt to fail when there are strong feelings on both sides of a historically sensitive issue. Evidence for this phenomenon was apparent in the multiple studies I conducted at Harvard on the aforementioned children of Holocaust survivors and children of Nazis, along with the great-grandchildren of enslaved African Americans with the descendants of slave owners. Both sets reported that they felt they had inherited a legacy that consumed large parts of their lives and identities.

The facilitated conversations between these polarized groups revealed similar threads of feelings and associations to the past that run through their lives. They also revealed an important difference in that most children of Nazis reported their parents told them stories about the war, whereas children of survivors reported their parents told them stories about the Holocaust. The daughter of a survivor put it like this:

I didn't even know there was a war until I was a teenager. I didn't even know fifty million people were killed during the war. I thought just six million Jews were killed. The stories I heard were always about taking the Jews to concentration camps. For my whole childhood I think I thought it was only the Jews who were killed. That it was just Nazis killing Jews. It wasn't until some history class that I realized this was a major war. But you know, still I think the Jews had it the worse, they suffered the most because every Jew was a victim like someone said.¹

The daughter of a Nazi officer put it like this:

I didn't know about the concentration camps until I was in my teens. First I heard about the Party. Then I heard stories about the war, about bombs falling or about not having food. I would hear that my father was an officer in the army, and I remember seeing pictures of him in uniform. And I remember his black shiny boots. And I saw a picture of him on a horse. At first I remember feeling proud to find out my father was an officer in the army.²

By providing an environment in which both sides could openly express their experiences, these two historically opposed groups were able to understand that

there was a sense of double victimhood. Without such an environment, this phenomenon would have prevented these conversations from the progress that led to common threads of understanding.

In a time of pandemic and racial reckoning, and with our civil discourse at a standstill, conversations on polarizing topics have an urgency as never before. Many people are walking on eggshells wondering what to say and how to say it, or worse, some people don't feel safe to share their viewpoint out of fear of reprisal.

This reflects the discomfort many have with the current widespread cancel culture. "It no longer feels safe to have conversations with people who have a different viewpoint" they say. Diversity and racial sensitivity programs aimed at exposing and curing biases and prejudices are unlikely to succeed at creating a culture of inclusion where everyone feels heard, and where nuanced meaningful conversations take place. Given these constraints, it is natural to ask, "Is there anything we can do? Are there any solutions we can live with?"

The quick answer is "yes." The solution requires a fair process of facilitated conversations in which people learn how to reason together scientifically about difficult questions, even when in stark disagreement. Over the years, thousands of students have joined me to reason scientifically about some of the most important polarizing questions we face as a society and in our everyday lives, including questions on racial justice, slavery, police racial bias, white privilege, immigration, BLM, and reparations.

People do not always think of scientific reasoning as a path to understanding in emotionally charged conflicts. *However, the nature of scientific reasoning causes one to pause, reflect, look to data for insight, and reach scientific consensus.*

When I was teaching the Psychology of Diversity course at Harvard recently, one of my students expressed the view that racism has long been the cause of rampant police brutality. In response, another student suggested that police brutality, regardless of race, may be a more pressing issue and noted a recent news article supporting the same.

We can imagine how an exchange beginning in this manner might unravel into an emotional debate and end in a deadlock. Especially in our current politically polarized environment, we can also see how little progress would be made had another student expressed the view that police brutality was not an issue at all. However, as a facilitator of the conversation, I encouraged them to ask "What do the data say about the relation between race and

police brutality? Which other factors contribute to the nexus between the two?"

The class was then tasked with finding peer-reviewed scientific journal articles on the issue that have conflicting findings. When people are encouraged to seek out information in support of both sides, they are encouraged to seek out information without an agenda. This allowed us to problem solve together by asking, "Why do these studies come to opposite conclusions? What data collection and analytic methods were used? What other factors could play a role in the discrepancy?"

From there, the conversation was able to open up and move forward. We could then ask more difficult questions such as, "What effect does taking race out of the conversation on police brutality have on a person who has experienced racism? What effect does placing race as the central cause of police brutality have on a person who has experienced such brutality without race being a factor?"

Scientific reasoning does not take emotion out of the conversation. Instead, it allows us to pause and reflect on what effect our emotions have on the progression of our dialogue. This is what tends to go missing in conversations about polarizing diversity topics, but it is also what I have found to be imperative to include. *It is the only way to recognize our blind spots and transform them into facilitators rather than obstacles.*

This is the method used in science and problem-solving education. It is dialectic between persons holding different hypotheses about a topic but wishing to understand one another and test their views. One does not judge the other for their view. One does not try to win a debate. One does not expect the other to change or think differently. Rather, the expectation is that one will learn to reason scientifically about the topic.

Many great scientists, including Nobel Prize winners Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, and Richard Feynman, have stressed that scientific reasoning is the key to developing peoples' moral and intellectual strengths, and that this would lead to a better society. According to Feynman, the scientific worldview is a habit of mind, and once acquired one cannot retreat from it. I would underscore, as Feynman did, that scientific reasoning contains within itself a system of logic and standards of evidence that can be used for building a culture of inclusion. This method has the potential to create an environment where everyone feels safe to express a hypothetical viewpoint and open to understanding that more than one view can be hypothetically true at once.

Scientific reasoning does not rely on armchair

theorizing, political conviction, or personal opinion, but instead on methods of empirical research independently available to anyone as a means of opening the world to scrutiny. All opinions are viewed as hypotheses to be tested, rather than as appeals to emotion. When conversations on polarizing topics get bogged down by passionate opinions, scientific reasoning lifts us up so we can consider the alternative hypothesis.

It is a universal fact that diversity is a feature of nature. This is true of individuals, families, social classes, religious groups, ethnic groups, and nations. There will always be diverse polarized views with which people passionately identify. Scientific reasoning is a fair two-sided method for evaluating polarized views, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation.

Embracing scientific reasoning and using logic and standards of evidence can bolster American education and heal our riven society. While agenda-driven diversity training programs are divisive, the scientific reasoning method is connective. Agenda-driven diversity training programs try to resolve differences by methods of shame and pressure that seek to win and control the debate and by cherry-picking evidence in support of an idea, action, or theory, typically with the aim of persuading others to share one's "right" view.

By contrast, the scientific reasoning method dissolves differences by *asking people to consider all the data, ask each other questions about what the data mean, and reach a consensus about what is and is not agreed on.* They then have a foundation on which to collaborate and explore how to test the questions about the points on which they disagree. *The process of scientific reasoning is based on finding out what is true, and not, "What can I prove and convince you of?"*

Scientifically reasoning together shifts the dynamics of the culture from one of divisiveness to one of connectedness, thereby making it possible to have a truly inclusive culture that includes different perspectives. That is why it is so vital. ■

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1. Weissmark, M., 2020. *The Science of Diversity*. Oxford University Press, p. 219.
2. Ibid., 219-220.

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