I always thought fairness was just going to happen.

Tracy Turnblad in ‘Hairspray’

Success in business depends heavily on hiring the most talented people you can find. Why, then, would anyone screen applicants by skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, size, age, nationality, or religion? Look how long that list is; think of all the people discounted before anyone has met them.

Still, when it comes to being open to the best person bar none, it’s taken consultants, budgets, task forces, special interest groups, papers, conferences, diatribes and rants, marches and finally law. It all feels like routinely marching up a massive glass hill. Why this resistance to difference, when it seemingly makes no sense?

After years of circular argument and resort to the force of law, social scientists have begun to suggest that pushing the logic and ethical argument so hard is pointless, because people don't often change perceptions, attitudes and behaviour by listening to reason.

Maybe instead, they suggest, we need to ask why stereotyping and prejudice are so widespread, irrespective of era or culture; why when it comes to difference, people so readily shun one another.

Scientists interested in this question thought that noticing self and other – and then stepping back from difference - might be hard wired rather than learned. And if that were true, maybe we could figure out how to stop stepping back. Evolutionary biologists went on to say that self and other mechanisms might have served an adaptive purpose in primitive times.

Illustration from visual and action cues contribute to the self−other distinction

By Marc Jeannerod Nature Neuroscience
7, 422 - 423 (2004)

It seems the scientists were not far off. Ancient brain mechanisms identify self and other – other being anyone who isn’t you - and then sees individuals of another group in a broad brush stereotype. It’s all the function of a primitive visual system.
However, the good news is twofold. We don’t naturally see difference as bad; that part is learned, so as individuals we disband a stereotype pretty quickly. And, even if we have grown up seeing some differences as sinister, just a short time in someone’s collegial company brings individuals into sharp focus – not as individuals in another group but as individuals in one’s own.

**Research shows how stereotyping works**

Here’s how the research evolved, moving to ever deeper layers of core questions.

First, is self/other discrimination implicit? That is, do we make distinctions automatically, on the basis of whether we share observable characteristics or do not share them? Is it automatic, whether we like it or not? Are we aware of it? It was back to the old question: nature or nurture. Does everyone do that? Or, is it only some, who learn subtlety and nuance from people who raise them?

The consensus is that yes, most people don’t mean to screen by skin-deep features but in the first instance most of us do exactly that – naturally. The brain forms implicit assumptions about people who look different. Which means that beneath consciousness we attribute characteristics such as good/bad, trustworthy or not, and capable or not to people whose overall visual profile is different from our own.

But look at this: research also confirms that after just six days of working with someone you one responded to as another the implicit assumptions all but disappear from the radar. It’s a wonder and a joy to think about how really simple that is.

**Prejudice diminishes under the right conditions**

Back to evolutionary biologists and their central question: why does this self/other distinction exist. If it doesn’t serve useful purpose now, but what function could it have served when it arose? (To give you a bit of background, evolutionary theory says that personal and behavioural qualities which helped people survive endured across generations while neutral, useless or harmful qualities died out.) Did it survive from primitive times? Does self/other serve a purpose today, or is it vestigial?
To find out, scientists studied young people’s sports teams and camp groups. The bottom line is that people on opposing teams instantly become the other irrespective of diversity among one’s team members – and it stays that way. The bond of the team is almost indestructible, especially if there is a known competing team.

So why are sports teams so often integrated? There’s an opposing team competing for rare resources – fans, cheering, trophies, publicity and money. People on the team are team mates, first and last.

The same scientists went on to study the history of the world’s mad love for sports and then other forms of competition. They went back as far as you can go and they’ve decided it’s true. Sports isn’t about kicking a ball – or throwing it in a hoop or tossing it or putting it; it’s about being competitive. Competing is deeper in our nature than any force of race, religion, and the rest. Our team is us, and other is the other team.

The surprising news, then, is that self/other didn’t evolve to provide us a sense of social dominance or hierarchy or a superficial sense of superiority. It served hunters and gatherers a way to identify competitors for scarce resources. And the good news is that self/other barriers drop within a few days of working on a team – especially if you’re competing.

**What you can do today**

If you want to diversity in your workplace, start with small teams of competent people in a strong, mature culture. Follow all the old rules about team roles and ensuring that talent is welcome rather than a source of distrust. You don’t need rival teams, because six days working together dissolves the negative attribution initially held as implicit assumption.

At an individual level, work with someone other for just a little while on something you both agree is challenging. You not only see the individual as an individual; your view of the other group comes more into focus.

And, consider these six tips, drawn from ideas put forth by the American Psychological Association and used with their permission.
1. **Be a partner:** Work on projects with members of groups different from your own. Working as an equal alongside others from different groups on a common project is one of the best ways to undo prejudice.

2. **Be honest:** Recognize your own biases and biases through open discussion with others. Examine your own prejudices, biases, and values.

3. **Be a student:** Educate yourself and others. Read the science; follow the follow-ups. Develop your own ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. Share when appropriate.

4. **Be a teacher:** Teaching Tolerance published by the Southern Poverty Law Center offers ideas and resources. Use Storytelling to build common experience, shared understanding and bonds.

5. **Be an anti-racist parent:** Expose your children to diversity at a young age. Children can benefit from knowing other groups at very early ages, before prejudices and biases begin to seem natural.

6. **Be a role model:** Be vocal in opposing racist views and practices. And don't just criticize; help educate others about the issues.

So, we've a completed circle. It seems that discrimination is an age-old economic survival mechanism running subconsciously and controlled by the visual system. And it seems almost certain that in modern times, with understanding and acceptance – not extra money or consultants - we can quietly, quickly, surely topple the blockades.

**Here are some links for further reading**

**Research: Race Awareness Malleable, Joan Margruder**

A UC Santa Barbara study concludes that the degree to which individuals notice and remember each other's race is far more variable - and changeable - than previously thought.

**Unmasking Bias, National Science Foundation (US)**

Implicit Association Tests can help individuals identify their own unconscious biases, and use that knowledge to help avoid discriminatory behaviour.

The IAT provides a new view of unconscious bias that is difficult to believe at first.
“My team is the best … yours stinks.”

Psychologist Muzafer Sherif and colleagues created an experiment that demonstrated just how quickly we form alliances within a group against another group, and how seriously we take these group differences.

**Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer, Leda Cosmides & John Tooby**

The mind is a set of information-processing machines that were designed by natural selection to solve adaptive problems faced by our hunter-gatherer ancestors. This way of thinking about the brain, mind, and behaviour is changing how scientists approach old topics, and opening up new ones.

**Are some people more prejudiced than others?**

While commonsense may suggest that parents' specific attitudes toward other groups directly influence their children's views, studies have not shown this to be the case.

**Law & the Brain**

The legal implications of the new experiments involving bias and neuroscience are hotly disputed.

**Race Attributions and Georgetown University Basketball, Jon Hanson & Michael McCann**

…How group identification and misidentification — “us” and “them” — gives rise to various motivated attributions of causation, responsibility, and blame. Our analysis focused on college basketball fans in the height of March Madness. The motivated attributions include the ultimate attribution error….

**The Self and the Other: The Purpose of Distinction, Ranulph Glanville**

Programma OOC, University of Amsterdam, Grote Bickersstraat 72, Amsterdam 1015 KS, The Netherlands and School of Architecture, Portsmouth Polytechnic, King Henry I St, Portsmouth PO1 2DY, UK

**Is it okay to harbour stereotypes if I just keep them to myself and treat everybody the same anyway?**

Just because stereotypes can operate automatically and outside of awareness, that does not mean that there is nothing we can do about them.

**Project Implicit.**