

A Conversation about Implicit Armor and Racial Identity

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A false hope [\[1\]](#)

The year was 1985. *Back to the Future* was my favorite movie. Wham's *Careless Whisper* and songs from Madonna's *Material Girl* streamed through my radio's speakers. As I navigated the 5th grade, I learned about the United States' Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. I learned about our history of the racist and segregationist Jim Crow laws from textbooks and was shocked by how inhumane they were. In my classes growing up, I learned that racism had ended and that America was now a 'melting pot' where everyone was welcome. This belief – the disappearance of struggle – was a heartening relief. We didn't have to face the past or recognize our origins. Instead, we could lean into the 'melting pot,' absolved of the past, and not acknowledge the actions we take to protect ourselves from the intergenerational trauma of forced and voluntary immigration.

In later years, I recognized that, of course, racism had not ended. The idea of the melting pot, also, is neither ideal nor possible; not even desirable. Its message appeared to be one of assimilation; one must erase something of oneself to assimilate. The fact remains that we cannot erase the past, our cultural origins, or the social construct of race. Long-standing patterns of discrimination and bias exist and have led to deadly consequences far too frequently. It appears that there is more openness to speak to these realities of persistent racism today, over a year after the murder of George Floyd.

I have become aware of the defenses, or 'implicit armor' carried by people who are not in the majority. This armor both represents our wish to protect from and simultaneously join the majority culture. A Black physician colleague who dresses impeccably at work shared that he does so to defend himself. His suit and tie demand respect, denote his professional status, and provide armor. This necessity was a revelation to me.

My defenses strike back

Speaking about race can be uncomfortable. It is to me. To wit: as we reach the fourth paragraph of this writing, I have not yet revealed my background. My name betrays a vague heritage of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent. Specifically, my parents are Muslims from South India, and I was born and raised in the United States. Growing up, I assumed that I did not have any armor. Recently, I began to wonder, what protects me?

My father arrived in the US in 1970. He speaks fluent English, but his native language has slightly different letters. The R's and L's in Malayalam-accented English are manifold – and the W's and V's are indistinguishable. As a child, I did not hear an accent in my parent's English, but others did. My father has said that work colleagues did not always understand him. He later decided that my brother and I should speak English at home and, purposely, not learn Malayalam. The point? To master the American accent.

Indeed, I do have an American accent (and do not speak any of India's native tongues). Could my accent and facility with English be a way to defend myself from being misunderstood in ways more significant than simply practical ones? In other words, if my American accent was easy to understand, perhaps it was also a way to combat prejudice and discrimination. Although it made sense to them at

the time, my parents' approach was a way to separate me inexorably from their country of origin. I have settled into an in-between status.

Another bit of armor I now recognize is education. My parents' insistence on achieving a stable career (such as engineering) was not only to have a steady income but also as a way to be equal. In other words, it was a way to become more like the majority, to be accepted, to survive, and to command respect. As an artistic child, I horrified my parents with Hollywood dreams; they feared that I would not be accepted because of my race. (Instead, I chose the most artful branch of medicine I could find: psychoanalytic psychiatry.)

Before my psychoanalytic training, my defense was always to move ahead; to move forward without thinking about what I had lost, or grieving the changes in my life. In doing so, I was not able to face who I was. At times, I would gravitate towards embracing more of the American part of my identity; at other times the Indian or the Muslim part. It was as though I had to embody one cultural identity without input from another.

My training enabled me to slow down and integrate a meaning of myself that was more complex but true. It made me accept that I embody characteristics of multiple cultures, and I stopped trying to reject parts of myself to adopt other parts. This integration allowed me to feel more of a solid sense of self; one that was informed by multiple cultures. This more complex understanding does not lend itself to the idea of a 'melting pot' that I learned as a child.

What is striking is that these defenses – ensuring that I speak English with an American accent, not knowing my parents' native language, and prioritizing an academic career – are in stark contrast to the prior generations of women in my family. Although I might be more assimilated here due to my choices, I became very different from my family in India. To meet and succeed within a majority culture, I became less recognizable as a part of my family. (Of note, not all generations of immigrants have chosen the same defenses. Children of 1970s-era Indian emigrés to America may align less with their parents, than their children do with them.)

The force awakens

Conversations have begun within the profession of psychoanalysis nationally and globally – uncomfortable conversations and moving ones; about acknowledging one another's heritage and how we recognize each other. It seems likely that implicit bias lies within all of us, whether we are of the majority or minority sub-cultures. Implicit armor appears to function in individuals and groups of all minority sub-cultures: these are ways they have fashioned to tolerate their minority status and to protect themselves.

We often have defenses around discussions of race. Some feel that they might offend others at every turn, or that they may inadvertently speak to stereotypes. One clear reason to avoid discussions of race is to avoid the feelings that may arise. Some of those feelings include surprise and shame that we have biases, and worries that we may act upon those biases we hold.

For example, after publishing an article on racism, the authors discovered that although we listed the profession of a contributor, we had inadvertently omitted the licensing credentials of one of the Black contributors.

This led to a discussion where a variety of reactions and proposed solutions emerged. Some found this discussion uncomfortable. Others did not take this omission seriously, as it was clearly

unintentional. Some felt that the unconscious nature of the omission made it more notable. What decisions did we make that were largely unconscious? Many had proofread the article, and had not noticed this error. Had we stripped the author of her credentials, in an article about racism, no less? How should we repair and address such an omission? To inquire and associate to our unconscious processes seems essential.

Conclusion

The concept of a 'melting pot' has decayed; in its place are a set of realizations that the defenses we develop become part of our identity. As a society, and as a profession, we must work to be more candid about recognizing our implicit armor, and take the difficult conversations head-on.

[1] Editor's note: the section titles refer to titles of movies from the *Star Wars* series, with slight changes in wording.