

David Johnson
Diversity Statement

As an instructor and a mentor, I strive to create an inclusive atmosphere in which all students can participate in open and candid discussions of human behavior. My goal is to expose students to new perspectives so they can better understand their own behavior as well as the behavior of others. In addition, my primary topic of research—race bias in police use of force—has direct and important impacts regarding the experiences of minority populations. Both roles are key parts of how I will contribute to issues of diversity as a faculty member.

As a social psychologist I am well aware of how unintentional biases can influence behavior in ways that discriminate against people of color. That is why I am interested in the question of race bias in officers' shooting decisions. To address this question, I spent the past year compiling information from 2015 on the officers and civilians involved in these shootings from newspaper databases, internet searches, and by contacting law enforcement agencies directly. This data will not only speak to the degree to which police disproportionately use lethal force against people of color, but can answer novel questions such as whether a lack of racial diversity in law enforcement is linked to increased shootings of ethnic minorities. Thus, my research would have clear implications for policies that encourage diversity in officer recruitment.

In addition to my research on race bias in police use of force, the past three summers I mentored four young men and women from ethnic minorities through Michigan State's McNair program. This intensive two-month program is funded through a Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) grant from the National Science Foundation. The program gives underrepresented students the opportunity to get research experience they could not obtain at their home institution. Each student completes an independent research project on a topic shaped by the laboratory they are assigned to—in my laboratory, racial bias in the decision to shoot. As a mentor, I had close daily interactions with these students. I gave them advice on the research process, resources on how to pursue graduate education, and provided encouragement when they encountered difficulties. I also walked them through each step of the research process. All of my mentees successfully presented their project at local conferences at the end of their program.

Finally, my teaching strategies and techniques create an inclusive classroom environment. As a social psychologist, I often cover topics of stereotyping and discrimination. These are difficult topics for many students, especially those who have not experienced many negative effects of discrimination. My goals are two-fold. First, I illustrate how stereotypes can unintentionally develop through the basic act of social categorization. This helps students understand why they may hold such beliefs without making them feel attacked. Second, I describe situations when stereotypes are likely (and unlikely) to influence behavior. This leaves students with knowledge they can immediately use in their personal lives to limit unintentional bias in their behavior.

In sum, I address issues of diversity in my research, mentorship, and teaching. As a researcher, I tackle difficult issues like racial bias in the decision to shoot. As a mentor, I will continue to actively work with programs that offer research experiences to students from underrepresented groups. Finally, as a teacher, I teach students ways to understand and avoid acting on biases. These lessons give students the tools to positively relate to others in a diverse world.