This article discusses how Whites’ racism has mutated into a new form – one that is indirect, subtle, and often unintentional – called “aversive racism.” Although its operation may be subtle, its consequences can be significant, adversely affecting the well being of Black Americans.

We begin with an illustration. In 1973, we conducted a field experiment involving White residents of Brooklyn, NY, who identified themselves politically as liberals and conservatives. Both the liberal and conservative households received wrong-number telephone calls that quickly developed into requests for assistance. The callers, who were clearly identifiable from their dialects as being Black or White, explained that their car was disabled and that they were attempting to reach a service garage from the public phone along the parkway. The callers further claimed that they had no more change to make another call and asked the subject to help by calling the garage. If the subject refused to help or hung up after the caller explained that he or she had no more change, a “not helping” response was recorded. If the subject hung up before learning that the motorist had no more change, the response was considered a “premature hang up.”

The first finding from this study was direct and predictable. Conservatives were less likely to help Blacks than Whites (65 percent versus 92 percent), whereas liberals helped Blacks and Whites more equally (75 percent versus 85 percent). If we were to have left the findings here, liberals would appear to be relatively well-intentioned.

However, this edge is cancelled out by liberals having “hung up prematurely” much more often on Blacks than they did on Whites (19 percent versus 3 percent). Conservatives did not discriminate in this way (8 percent versus 5 percent). Thus both conservative and liberal Whites discriminated against Blacks but in different ways.

What could possibly explain such behavior among people who presumably consider themselves egalitarian? The explanation, as this and subsequent studies have demonstrated, is that many liberal White people will not publicly and consciously express bias against Blacks,
but, because they have unconscious negative feelings about Blacks, they will discriminate in subtle ways. This subtle and unconscious bias is what we mean when we refer to aversive racism.

Many people forego considerable personal gain to dedicate themselves to making the world better in some way – through volunteer work, by supporting others in their community or on the job, or by promoting cultural richness. Racism, we can probably all agree, is antithetical to this spirit. The problem is that these same well-intentioned people are also racist and, as we will subsequently discuss, they are racist without being aware of it.

**Overt Racism**

Racism is easy to recognize in its most blatant forms. Traditional forms of racism in the United States have been expressed directly and openly. Racism produced racial segregation in neighborhoods and schools, and open discrimination in employment. Due in part to the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s, however, the nature of racism has changed. This legislation defined racism not only as morally improper but also as legally wrong. We can readily agree that good people should not discriminate.

We can probably also agree that racism has aided in producing a myriad of social ills, redlined neighborhoods suffering from inadequate infrastructures, substandard segregated schools, open discrimination in employment, high infant mortality rates, and a host of other problems. Many of these problems persist and have worsened over time. How do we explain this?

Even while overt racism has declined since the 1960s, some of the motivations that underlie racism still exist. Racism can offer advantages. Discriminating against others can boost one’s self-esteem and promote feelings of control and superiority. Tangibly, discrimination offers economic advantages to members of the majority group and serves to maintain that group’s political, social, and corporate power. Thus racism has emerged in new forms, such as aversive racism.

**Aversive Racism**

Aversive racism rests on an inherent contradiction: The denial of personal prejudice co-exists with underlying unconscious negative