



What You Folks Had to Say about Racial Stereotyping

by Timothy McCall, MD

In my last email newsletter, I discussed an incident in which I was accused of using racial stereotyping during a workshop on yoga anatomy and shared [a letter I had written to the students who'd attended](#). In it, I apologized, tried to explain my intention, and asked them and you to offer suggestions and comments on what happened, and thoughts on how I might have navigated this terrain more skillfully.

I was blown away by the deluge of thoughtful, heartfelt responses. Below are quotations from many of the emails — which I suspect you will find fascinating and illuminating, as I did. No one's name will be shared, only their words. While there were other excellent letters I might have chosen to include here, I felt these captured the variety of opinions without too much overlap.

What You Had to Say

I am writing to you as an African-American yoga teacher, studio owner and cancer survivor. One of my colleagues forwarded your newsletter to me because it touches on much of what we are working on untangling.

That said, I really wanted to let you know that while you are in the hot seat, your handling of this issue, topic and response was good... I want you to know that the uncomfortability that you feel is true, imperative to the conversation, because your being uncomfortable did put you in a position to decide what to do. You took the hard road — made yourself vulnerable and there you go. Here we all go, sharing the uncomfortable.

I'm also remembering the white male yoga teacher who taught the anatomy portion of my 300 hour teacher training. He was all about the importance of walking and spoke about his travels to Africa and noticing how people were walking, the variation in sizes and glute shape/development and he was so excited to see that there was swaying of hips and no tucking of tail bones which is not the American 'tight assed' way is what he literally said — that causes back issues. It didn't offend me. Instead, I was surprised by his awe and appreciation for Black culture and felt that he was able to see me.



Remembering now my ballet teacher back in southern Minnesota, where my sister and I grew up as the only Black children in mostly everything. This teacher kept telling me to hold my rear in or down...and to this day, while I LOVE(d) adjustments in a yoga class, including a really good uttanasana adjustment reminds me of that ballet experience still some 40 years later. The slightest things do stay with us all.

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As white people, we think of racism as the grand actions like the murder of George Floyd, and so many others before him, or denying someone access to participation in some part of our society. What we ignore is the fact that our society is so fundamentally imbued with ideas that reinforce all the -isms that we live in a cultural stew where members of dominant groups deliver a thousand little cuts to the members of groups who do not occupy that same privilege. And, we do it unconsciously which is why the whole system is so virulent.

My reading of your letter and the events you describe is that you stepped into the historied tropes of black bodies vs. white bodies that stems out of the long history of European colonization. Even though your thought was anchored in a scientific study, science has not been, and is not, culturally neutral. Our whole system of racism was purported to be rooted in science.

The work is hard. I'm right in there with you, as I still check myself every day. But it's SO worth it. Thank you for being willing to be transparent. If we don't show how we stumble there is no opportunity for us all to learn.

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Yes, you did hurl a painful stereotype to those in the class.

Not all Black people have big behinds. The research, sometimes forced, that tries to find scientific proof that we possess some magical bone or muscle that can explain our skills in sports is mainly folly. It is that same brush that tries to paint the picture of white intellectual superiority. Or that seeks the Asian gene to explain why they appear to do well in math. Simply put, practice. Simply put, studying. Simply put, hard work.

For centuries white racists have sought ways to separate Blacks from all that is considered "human." Our bodies have been abused, ridiculed, raped, lynched, altered. We have been caged in zoos in Europe for whites to laugh at and observe. We have had our lips exaggerated in



early 20th century postcards and books. Even today, Gucci has had to be called out. Fendi has had to be called out and other international businesses have been called to the carpet for negative depictions of African Americans. The Williams sisters have been regularly taunted and ridiculed by their white competitors who poke “fun” at the size of their behinds. These women should be tossed, forever, from the game of tennis.

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Thank you once again for the opportunity to study with you in the Reimagining Yoga Anatomy course... I did want to share my thoughts on the incident of alleged racial stereotyping which I did not view at all as offensive. (Granted, I am a white female from a completely different cultural and /or social perspective). I simply regarded this explanation as a comment and educational opportunity to observe differences in alignment and anatomy between various ethnic populations. We yoga instructors observe and study bodies — the anatomy, alignment, and morphology — and there are distinct differences and variations between populations. I observe and appreciate the diversity and variety in our own anatomical expressions, and received your words and explanation in the same way.

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I had a yoga teacher in my teacher training 8 years ago who taught anatomy in an even more problematic way. She actually lined us all up and compare the curvatures of our spines as well as other body features. She explained how we are different in our body features/structures according to our race in an effort to help us understand that we need to teach/adjust with this in mind. She mentioned how people of African descent had a greater curvature and Europeans very little and how Asians had short legs. It was a humiliating and highly vulnerable experience that I will never forget.

I am Asian and one time during the training, she explained to my adjustment partner that she had to do the adjustment differently because I had super short legs, loudly in front of everyone. Again, I was humiliated. I understood that she was trying to be helpful and had good intentions; nonetheless, it was humiliating.

At the time, I didn't say anything because I thought it was my problem that I was so sensitive and insecure about my body to be triggered in this way. Now I see things differently and I wish I could have said something.



I don't think what you said was nearly as bad but at the end of the day, what we all want is to be considered as an individual whether we fit the stereotypes or not. And we feel vulnerable when our body features seemed to be put on display or talked about according to our race, for whatever reason, especially in a group setting. It's not a good feeling.

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My partner is black and i've just read your explanation letter to him and his words were “anyone who took offence to facts is looking to be offended.”

We live in a very difficult time where it seems that common sense and often humour are lost on people trying too hard to be correct. There are always things that can be improved upon but in your situation I think your reason for pointing out the larger gluteal muscles in black people is founded and a very simple but important fact when diagnosing.

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I’m an older white lady, so consider the source, but in my opinion, if larger gluteal muscles are documented in persons of African biological heritage, then referring to them in a clinical setting and a respectful manner is not engaging in “racial stereotyping.” Unfortunately, stereotypes nearly always rest upon something that is real...

Since none of us can know ahead of time how our words will be received by others, of course we who enjoy a privileged place in our culture must be open to hearing what is offensive to others, and to take that into serious consideration. It’s uncomfortable to allow ourselves to be in that vulnerable place, but it’s our responsibility to do so.

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Good for you posting and welcoming dialogue. Many of us are practicing self-study related to our implicit biases. It will be a lifelong endeavor.

My thought is why say African descent? Isn’t it true that anyone with large buttock muscles can be misdiagnosed with lordosis? Those that are obese can be misdiagnosed also. I understand you were trying to prevent future pain by educating your students about this. People of color get scrutinized, in horrible ways, so much more than us white folks. So maybe just dropping the African descent part would help



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In your letter, you had mentioned larger buttocks muscles (totally ok to identify and a helpful part of the lesson for your students) and then singled out African descent individuals (not ok). What do you really gain by pointing at one race? You may not have had the intention, but you definitely racially stereotyped. This is ok as long as you learn from the feedback that was offered to you by a student!

Your apology talks mostly about you and not about those whom you offended. Redirect next time to focus on them rather than you and simply apologize. Over-explaining and justifying can appear quite tacky. Your paragraph of "To those I offended" was great.... should have been the first thing people read.

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The best thing to do (if this happens again) is to extend gratitude to the people offended, then apologize and avow that you are committed to improving your language about race. Like all of us, you are an imperfect being and you will keep refining your personal practice on and off the mat for the rest of your life.

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I think it's quite courageous of you to bring this incident to light, to explain your thinking and intention, and to apologize if any harm was caused — that's all anyone can do and aligns with our yogic tradition. Recognizing that there ARE some racial differences is a tricky path to navigate. . . you were trying to bring this to light in a helpful way that appears to have been misunderstood.

I find myself in a similar spot when discussing the fact that white and asian women are at higher risk of osteoporosis — black people tend to have stronger bones. How can we stay true to the science and not offend? Clearly, we are both white and may have inherent bias — so in my view it's important to be humble and keep the dialogue open.

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Stop, by all means trying to prove you are not racist. It is always received as defensiveness and often makes people check out in their own defensiveness. Defensiveness shuts us down from learning (both of which clearly are not true about you based on the way you are willing to disclose and mine this experience for growth).



One of my great Mentors of cultural diversity taught that, "we are all recovering racists, sexists, ageists" etc. and our job is to heal our defensiveness and embrace that the mammal part of our brain has a default position that judges "the other." Luckily, there is a higher brain, that yoga, and all spiritual practice, or intentional mindful awareness, helps to grows. The pre-frontal cortex and the ability to train it as our new default is a practice, not a place we ever arrive. Helping us evolve to higher, more inclusive ways of Seeing and eventually, Being.

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... in medical school and beyond, we as physicians came to appreciate the anatomical variations of "normal" in the human body. As you know, while these variations exist across all races and nationalities (i.e. myself as a Jewish person being short and stocky), it is also true that there are many Jews who are tall and lanky; one of my cousins). The same would be true for any physical characteristic. I think the most important part of your comments is the fascinating misdiagnosis of a sway back when the larger gluteal muscles were not appreciated... I know that your comments were not meant to be harmful or derogatory but I would definitely focus more on anatomic variations in all people.

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While there is such great sensitivity in the air (which obviously is warranted, given our country's history and the fact that we haven't fully reckoned with it yet), I'd steer clear of race entirely. Perhaps simply referring to people with more developed buttocks (without "including" anyone in that category — even if it's true), would convey the information without mixing it in any way with race. People can make their own connections.

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There is such a history of white people discussing black people's bodies in a way that is detached and not well intentioned to say the least. That history makes any such discussion potentially offensive.

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I guess you need to be equally careful in discussing the fact that many Asian people exhibit the opposite tendency — to be diagnosed with too-flattened spinal curves, when that is just their typical presentation and is usually not at all pathological.



...Oh and we Jews have been chosen to have superior nasal filtration for pranayama. ;)

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I am a trained, licensed health care provider. I think people need to know that these structural differences are confirmed by research, that it's not just someone's opinion or judgment. I have run into similar challenges when teaching anatomy workshops, though I've never been called out (I think people are trigger-happy right now). The fact is that there ARE structural differences, as you and I both know, between people of various races. And between men and women, which I rebelled against for many years. I should be able to lift just as much as that guy!

A few years ago I went to a fascinating exhibit at the Smithsonian, put together by forensic scientists. It was about the bodies they dug up at Jamestown, which I have visited several times. They were able to determine the identities of the people, in unmarked graves, by their age, manner of death, and....facial characteristics they observed by studying the skulls. Englishmen tend to have long, narrow faces. Native Americans have broad high cheekbones. And so forth. I guess we are just going to have to learn to be more skillful as we discuss these structural realities.

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I believe that until we can begin openly acknowledging our differences, we will never be able to truly celebrate our sameness.

What Can We Learn from This?

Clearly, as the above quotations illustrate, there are major differences among us in the yoga world about this matter. And my guess is even after airing them, we aren't all going to be in full agreement anytime soon. But, it occurs to me, that the willingness to engage in this difficult topic is a good step toward coming together to forge a better future.

What I think almost all of us *can* agree on — and which might give us a skillful path forward — is to honor that the practice of yoga sits on the foundation of *ahimsa*, non-harming. Whether or not there actually are racial differences in bone and muscular structure, we do not want to inflict harm on others with our words.



I was taught that the Patanjali's placement of ahimsa before *satya*, truth-telling, in the list of *yamas* (ethical guidelines) in the *Yoga Sutras* meant that it was ahimsa that should be considered more important. In other words, it may sometimes be more skillful to not speak things we believe to be true, if doing might cause harm to others. Just as ahimsa is the first of the five *yamas*, the *yamas* are the first of the eight limbs of yoga Patanjali outlines — they too are considered the most important. Thus, ahimsa, the first item in the first category, is the bedrock that all of yoga rests on.

I made the case in my letter to the workshop students that not talking about race in this instance might have meant some African-Americans might not learn that they were at greater risk of getting misdiagnosed as having an excessive lumbar curve, and might come to harm as a result. As I was trained to do in medicine, I weighed the risks vs. benefits and concluded it would be better to mention this, and I tried to do so diplomatically.

What I hadn't realized was how offensive and hurtful my words would be to some people in the audience. I had been thinking that if it were skillfully worded, what I had to say would be taken in without issue. I now know that I inadvertently wounded people. This new understanding causes me to re-evaluate the risk/benefit ratio and conclude that in this instance it would be better, as several of you suggested, to leave race out of it. Going forward that's what I plan to do.

One thing that none of you raised, which occurs to me made this situation worse, is that in our society there is so much shame and judgment surrounding the shape and size of our butts. And as one of you pointed out, some of this has been disproportionately directed at African-Americans, like Serena Williams. This makes the issue of differences in gluteal muscles between individuals and how that affects assessment of the spine way more loaded than racial differences in the risk of osteoporosis or prostate cancer. But even there, it seems, we need to tread carefully.

No one is suggesting that all members of a race or ethnic group will manifest commonly seen differences that may be the basis of stereotypes. It's only that knowledge of ethnicity may help — and again I am speaking as a physician — better identify who might benefit from a bone mineral density scan, a PSA or a [tensegrity test](#).

Could I have been more skillful in my apology? Was I feeling a little hurt and defensive, and wanting to establish my anti-racist bona fides? I can own that. I should have led with my apology, thanked those who complained for raising my awareness and then perhaps tried to explain where I was coming from.



Shortly after I sent out my letter, it occurred to me that going public might have been a mistake, as a couple of my friends suggested. But the gracious, honest and thoughtful outpouring from you people and on Facebook (with zero trolling BTW) convinced me that it had been the right thing to do.

I have learned important lessons from this and it my hope that some of you have, too. May that learning continue for the rest of our lives.

Thank you all so much!

Namaste,

Timothy

Timothy McCall, MD is a board-certified internist, Yoga Journal's medical editor since 2002 and the author of the Amazon #1 bestseller *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing*. He practiced medicine in the Boston area for a dozen years before devoting himself



full-time in the late 1990s to yoga therapy. He has studied with many of the world's leading yoga teachers including BKS Iyengar and TKV Desikachar, as well as Patricia Walden, Rod Stryker and Donald Moyer. In 2005, Timothy began his studies with a traditional Ayurvedic doctor, Chandukutty Vaidyar, and spent more than a year at his clinic in Kerala, India. He serves on the editorial board of *The International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, and co-edited and contributed to the 2016 medical textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Yoga in Health Care*. His latest book is *Saving My Neck: A Doctor's East/West*

Journey through Cancer. Most recently, he has introduced an approach to yoga, which he calls Vinyasa of Breath. See DrMcCall.com