

## **Boulder Daily Camera**

### **Guest column: Headlines can prompt private profiling**

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The news reports have been alarming: there have been several armed robberies in Boulder in which a man described as "Hispanic" has robbed people using a gun and escaping on a bicycle. Obviously, we all need to exercise due caution. It is appropriate for everyone to be alert and safe.

It is also important that we be alert to something else -- the ease with which a situation like this can activate stereotypes and false connections that virtually all of us carry around in our heads.

Think back to the descriptions of these robberies. What did you notice? Chances are you were more aware of the fact that the assailant allegedly was Latino than of the fact that he reportedly rode a bicycle. Men of color in the United States are often connected to images of crime. Bicycles are not.

Over a decade of research has shown that everyone's mind produces instant, automatic images in response to experience, especially experiences related to social experiences. These images include both ideas and feelings, and they often occur below our awareness.

One such image is the false connection between men of color and danger. We make this linkage through a number of subtle mechanisms. For example, most white people fail to notice when an assailant is white but are likely to notice when an assailant is not white.

Sometimes, media reports add to this tendency. Many people, for example, believe that white people are more likely to be accosted by people of color when, in fact, most crime occurs within -- not between -- races and ethnic groups.

Some of the false images connecting men of color and crime have been promoted by the debate over immigration -- this despite the fact that research done at the University of Colorado demonstrated that there is no relationship between immigrant status and crime.

Fortunately, research also shows us how to interrupt such false connections. To change these linkages, we need to acknowledge them and even look for them; we can't just wish them away. We need to check out facts, especially facts that challenge our automatic assumptions.

For example, if we found ourselves scared of bicycles after reading about these robberies, we would tell ourselves that bikes aren't the issue: the vast majority of robbers don't use bicycles, and the vast majority of cyclists aren't dangerous. But we don't have to do that with bicycles because we don't begin with automatic connections between bicycles and crime.

On the other hand, we do tend to make automatic, though false, connections between men of color and crime. The connections have fertile ground when we don't know many people from different racial/ethnic groups well enough to allow direct experience to challenge the false connection.

Instead, we need to actively notice these ideas when they arise and interrupt them: the vast majority of crimes are not committed by men of color, and the vast majority of men of color are not involved with crime. It is possible to examine the connections we so easily make and, in the process, to stay better grounded in reality and less likely to engage in private versions of profiling.