

IMPLICIT PREJUDICE

Original Sin is to
Christianity as Implicit
Prejudice is to...

Background to the Great American Racism Debate

- Old-fashioned prejudice/racism has—over last 50 years—plummeted.
- Resulting Controversy: Should we take the good news at face value or should we assume that racism has simply “mutated” into new more subtle forms?

Advocates of “mutation” thesis:

- See need for ever sneakier measures for ever sneakier forms of prejudice;
- Set out in 1970’s to develop measures of symbolic or modern prejudice/racism;
- Set out in 1990’s to develop measures of implicit prejudice/racism.

Strengths of implicit prejudice research program

- Not overtly politicized like earlier efforts (e.g., to qualify as symbolic racist, one need only endorse conservative policies);
- Implicit prejudice is calibrated in millisecond differentials in reaction times and grounded in spreading activation models of associative memory.

Psycho-logic of Implicit-Prejudice Measures

- Sound principle: Rapidity with which people can perform recognition and memory tasks is partly a function of what they have been most recently thinking (e.g., exposure to word “bread” before “butter” speeds up recognition of “butter” by 100-200 ms)

From Sound Principles to Specious Inferences

- Does it follow: If you have a negative “implicit attitude” toward blacks, then exposure to black faces will impair recognition of positive words and facilitate that of negative words?
- Perhaps, but you run a huge risk of catching many other fish with this expansive net.

Reasons for expecting lots of false-positive charges of implicit racism

- Implicit measures classify 80 to 90% of whites as prejudiced (including vast numbers of people who sincerely see themselves as fair-minded);
- High “failure” rate is no accident: if you take theoretical logic of tests at face value, you should score as prejudiced as long as you satisfy three starkly minimalist conditions.

You are (implicitly) prejudiced if:

- You live in a society with real inter-group inequalities;
- You are aware of those inequalities;
- You attach evaluative significance to those inequalities (e.g., more crime is “bad;” less poverty is “good”).

Hard science; Soft conclusions

- Sets threshold for calling people prejudiced at unprecedented low (so low that it is easy to be a Bayesian bigot: fair-minded observers should—by logic of tests—score as prejudiced whenever they live in societies that fall short of equality of result);
- Liberals qualify if their “implicit negativity” rooted in awareness of depressing history of exploitation and its aftermath;
- Conservatives qualify if their implicit negativity rooted in view that main impediments to inequality are now internal to black community (ideology of “victimology”).

Choice point

- Stay in lab and address complex (“construct-validational”) issues surrounding the measures;
- Or rush to the press with their momentous discovery: forty years after the 1964 Civil Rights Act, declare that prejudice is still everywhere, present the claim as a scientific one and there is an urgent need for policy action on several fronts.

Key unresolved issues:

- (1) Can we distinguish automatically activated racial associations that are rooted in sympathy for a group as opposed to hostility?
- (2) Can we distinguish associations rooted in awareness of painful realities as opposed to exaggerated blame responses?
- (3) Do implicit measures predict willingness to inflict legally actionable harm on minority groups? Or is their predictive power limited to ambiguous criterion variables such as eye-blinking, speech fluency and seating preferences?

Unresolved issues cont'd:

- (4) Insofar as implicit measures can predict actionable discrimination, do such effects hold up after controlling for outliers as well as for more traditional, self-report indicators of prejudice (before one declares the discovery of a new form of racism, one should show it is more than the old kind)?;
- (5) Is the mere presence of, say, an African-American sufficient to activate an automatic array of race-specific associations or does the social context matter (an employment setting, a church, an inner-city crime scene,...)?

Unresolved scientific issues:

- (6) Do the effects of implicit racial associations hold up in work settings in which many of the classic ingredients for debiasing are present: people have long known each other and worked together in interdependent teams; corporate norms dictate impartiality; employees are accountable for violations of these norms, supervisors have strong incentives for choosing the right people for the right jobs, etc?

But activists warn against waiting. They feel we now know that:

- Current methods employers use to check discrimination and achieve (EEOC) compliance are inadequate;
- Aggressive quotas are only reliable method of guaranteeing equal opportunity (again, conflating equality of opportunity and result);
- FCC should pressure media to exercise restraint in linking race to crime and other negatively charged topics (“cognitive” externalities or mental pollution).

Political or Politicized Psychology

- When scientists move from hastily interpreted research to radical policy prescriptions, society should be suspicious;
- If researchers had stuck to the facts (automatically activated associations of an indeterminate nature) rather than plunging into the Great American Racism debate, this topic would not be on your agenda;
- Beware of “category mistakes” that blur factual and value, scientific and moral, judgments. Prejudice is a social, not a neurological, judgment call.

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- END

Judge the test by its correlates, not its theoretical logic:





What does it mean to be prejudiced?

Is it possible to adhere to classic benchmarks of rationality
and still be deemed “prejudiced?”

Rationality Benchmark #1: Expected utility Theory

Expected Utility Theory (EU) is a cornerstone of rational decision making. If you follow the dictates of this theory, you are behaving rationally, because you would thereby be maximizing utility

The Expected Utility of any option is the sum of the product of the probability and utility of all of the consequences of that option. For an alternative A_i , its expected utility is given by

$E[U(A)] = \sum p_i U(x_i)$, where $U(x_i)$ is the utility of each outcome x_i given alternative A , and p_i represents the probability of occurrence of each outcome.

Let's examine Reverend Jackson's statement
from the perspective of EU theory.

Utility of Possible Outcomes As
a Pedestrian's Footsteps Are Heard:

0 – uneventful

-1000 – worst possible

Disutility of fleeing when footsteps are heard = -2

1999 data from Department of Justice

2000 census data

Probability of being robbed is 7.49 times greater if the footsteps belong to a Black person compared to a White person.

Data Pertaining to Being Followed by a Black Pedestrian

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Utility of not fleeing} &= (p_{nr})(U_{nr}) + (p_r)(U_r) \\ &= (.9936)(0) + (.0064) U_r,\end{aligned}$$

Where U_r is the utility (disutility) of being robbed.

$$\text{Utility of fleeing} = (.9936)(-2) + (.0064)(-2) = -2$$

If we set the EU of not fleeing equal to the EU of fleeing and solve for U_r , we find that the disutility of being robbed would have to be worse than -312.5 for Rev. Jackson to flee from a Black person following him, assuming Jackson wants to be rational and maximize utility.

Data Pertaining to Being Followed by a White Pedestrian

Substituting the probabilities that the White follower was a robber, we find that the disutility of being robbed would have to be worse than -2347.4 for a utility maximizer to flee from a White follower.

Because the scale only goes to -1000 , it would never be rational for Rev. Jackson to flee from a White follower.

If Rev. Jackson thinks the disutility of being robbed is -313 or worse, it would always be rational for him to flee from a Black.

Assuming people have different opinions concerning the disutility of being robbed, aggregating over people we would find fleeing behavior varying as a function of the race of the follower. This behavior is consistent with EU theory. It is therefore rational. Can Rev. Jackson's comment nevertheless be a sign of prejudice?

Question #1:

Is behaving differently as a function of the race of the follower a sign of prejudice or a sign of rationality?

“There is nothing more painful to me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery. Then look around and see somebody White and feel relieved . . .”


--Jesse Jackson

Mary Frances Berry, chairwoman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, thought that this statement was an example of **extremely** bad judgment. Betty Shabazz, widow of Malcolm X, took exception to the implication that young Black males are violent.

Rationality Benchmark #2: The Discounting Principle

Kelly (1971): Attribution of an outcome to dispositional or internal causes should be tempered when plausible external causes are present.

Ross (1971, p. 181): “. . . The Discounting Principle requires a ‘psychologist’ able to assess the role of various social pressures and situation forces.” The person who successfully applies this principle demonstrates sound social perception.



The opposite of the Discounting Principle is the “fundamental attribution error.” Bad judges who make this error fail to take into account situation forces and mistakenly attribute the cause of a behavior to internal or “dispositional” forces. Good judges, on the other hand, use the discounting principle and take external factors into account.

Example of the Fundamental Attribution Error:

Ross, Amabile, and Steinmetz, 1977

Participants were ASSIGNED to either the questioner or contestant in a trivia quiz game. (“What was the name of my high school principal?”) Needless to say, the contestant did not do well. Both persons rated the knowledge of the questioner to be higher than that of the contestant. These internal attributions failed to take into account the unfair roles the two persons were obliged to assume. In other words, the external factor (assigned role) was given insufficient weight. This is the “fundamental attribution error.”

Summary:

The fundamental attribution error is an example of **bad** judgment. (That's why it is called an "error.")

The use of the discounting principle is an example of **good** judgment. One should discount internal attributions when there is present a possible external cause.

One gets “points” on the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986) when one expresses doubt about the competence of affirmative-action beneficiaries. (This is not a scale on which one would want to celebrate a high score.)

Affirmative action is an external cause for admission, advancement, promotion, etc. Competence is an internal cause. According to the discounting principle, one should reduce internal attributions in the presence of possible external causes.

However here the use of the discounting principle denotes **BAD** judgment, specifically modern racist judgment.

Observers disparage the abilities of persons who are perceived as having benefited from affirmative action:

Garcia, Erskine, Hawn, & Casmay, 1981

Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992

Jacobson & Koch, 1977

Northcraft & Martin, 198

Beneficiaries denigrate their own abilities:

Heilman, Battle, Leller, & Lee, 1998

Heilman, Simon, & Repper, 1987

Heilman, Block, & Stathos, 1997


Heilman et al. (1998)

Participants read of selection policies in which merit considerations were either:

- (a) The only consideration,
- (b) Equal in weight to demographic considerations,
- (c) Of less importance than the demographic considerations,
- (d) Of no importance.

Dependent variable was competence rating.

Result: To the extent merit considerations were more central, both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries gave higher ratings to the competence of the selected person.



Heilman et al. (1997) showed that this denigration occurred in both male and female managers. The latter are unlikely to be sexist toward females. However these persons appropriately used the discounting principle, which is diagnostic of good/bad judgment.

Rationality Benchmark #3: Use of Base rates



Lawyer-Engineer Tutorial

Kahneman & Tversky, 1973

100 thumbnail descriptions of 100 men, 70 of whom are engineers and 30 of whom are lawyers. (70/30 = prior odds)

Jack is a 45-year old man. He is married and has four children. He is generally conservative, careful, and ambitious. He shows no interest in political and social issues and spends most of his free time on his many hobbies which include home carpentry, sailing, and mathematical puzzles.

If this description is twice as likely to be that of an engineer as a lawyer, multiply the prior odds by 2, yielding 140/30.

The probability that this person is an engineer is thus

$$[140/140+30] = .82.$$

If there were 70 lawyers and 30 engineers, then the posterior probability of being an engineer is only .46.

Kahneman & Tversky (1973) found that participants failed to give adequate consideration to the base rates. Thus the 70/30 and 30/70 groups gave estimates which differed much less from each other than .82 and .46.

Kahneman & Tversky (1973, p. 243): “The failure to appreciate the relevance of prior probability in the presence of specific evidence is perhaps one of the most significant departures of intuition from the normative theory of prediction.”

In other words, not using base rates sufficiently constitutes

BAD judgment.

Example #1: Rev. Jackson **did** use base rates. Nevertheless he was accused by some prominent people of exhibiting very bad judgment indeed.

Example #2: Tetlock et al. (2000): Participants were asked to judge the propriety of decisions of insurance executives to issue home insurance policies in different neighborhoods and to charge different rates as a function of base rate statistics on risk of property damage.

Liberals: This strategy is perfectly OK

unless base rates were correlated with race, in which case charging different rates as a function of base rate statistics on risk of property damage was emphatically not OK.

#4: The Rationality of Associations:

Gigerenzer's thesis is that in a probabilistic environment, humans have developed very simple cognitive tools which do a surprisingly good job in solving the cue-outcome relations with which they are confronted.

Recognition heuristic: When deciding which of two foreign cities is larger, choose the one whose name you recognize.

Goldstein and Gigerenzer (2002) show that these fast and frugal heuristics can do about as well as multiple regression in a probabilistic choice task!

#4: The Rationality of Associations (continued)

Implicit Association Test (IAT) introduced by Greenwald, et al.
(1998)

1. Shavonn, Latonya --- left key

Katie, Heather --- right key

2. Poverty, prison --- left key

happy, lucky --- right key

- 3. Black or pleasant --- left key
- White or unpleasant - -- right key
- 4. Black or unpleasant - -- left key
- White or pleasant --- right key

Whites exhibit quicker reaction time when the response to unpleasant words occurs on the same response key as Black names (Latonya) as opposed to White names (Katie).

This differential reaction time has been deemed “implicit prejudice.”

Greenwald and colleagues think that persons who note this probabilistic relation between race and crime are guilty of implicit prejudice, which is a manifestation of bad judgment.

Rehearsal Time (for the Politically Incorrect)

1. Adhering to the tenets of expected utility theory comprises **good** judgment, unless the resulting behavior varies as a function of race, in which case adhering to the tenets of expected utility theory comprises **bad** judgment.
2. Using the discounting principle comprises **good** judgment, unless the resulting behavior results in the denigration of the performance of a beneficiary of affirmative action, in which case using the discounting principle comprises **bad** judgment.

For those in the judgment/decision making research community, the benchmarks of rationality are typically not so “contingent.” If you use EU theory you are generally considered to be more rational than a person who does not, irrespective of the domain of the decision.


Not so in the social psychological study of race. The benchmarks of rationality sometimes apply, but sometimes they don't.

Conclusion (thus far)


- It is possible to adhere to benchmarks of rationality and still be deemed prejudiced.
- In fact, such adherence seems to be essential.

How Can You Be Deemed Not Prejudiced?

- How about scoring very low on the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986)?
- Not good enough. You still might manifest amygdala firings associated with the perception of stimuli of “emotional significance” when Black (vs. White) faces are presented (Phelps, et al. 2000).



What moral stance should we take toward people who are “highly effective in responding in non-prejudicial ways” and show low scores on explicit scales of prejudice, but exhibit bad amygdala behavior or incriminating data on other implicit measures? Are these people in any way blameworthy? Should remedial action be taken?



If suspicious amygdala behavior and behavior congruent with expected utility theory are diagnostic of bigotry, then we may have too low a threshold for conviction.

Social psychologists have cranked up the magnification in their search for prejudiced behavior: differential eyeblink rates, etc.

To be clear...

In no way are we excusing intolerance. What we are saying is that the threshold for detecting it has been set so low that we suspect that many innocent people are being convicted along with the guilty.

Bottom Line

Type I errors (convicting the innocent) and Type II errors (exonerating the guilty) both have costs.

