

Unconscious racism in psychology

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Unconscious Racism in Psychology Addam Brown Ph. D. Entrance Writing Sample Fielding Graduate University Unconscious Racism in Psychology

Introduction This essay is aimed at exploring whether unconscious racism exists through analyzing both sides of the arguments. The paper will briefly review the research evidences that validate the existence of implicit racial behavior, and that many individuals have unconscious negative perceptions and stereotypical beliefs about minority groups that often leads to understated bias without conscious awareness. It will be followed by criticisms of the concept of unconscious prejudice and the evidences presented in opposition.

Empirical Studies Supporting Unconscious Racism

Racism in today's modern world is both inconsistently normal and irrational. According to the study by Richard Delgado (1997, p. 29), racism varies significantly with the common public ideology and exists in every member of the society, even though at unconscious levels. This irrationality and inconsistency is an integral part of the reason for the unconscious nature of bias. Delgado further explains that when our cultural traditions and beliefs teaches us to have racial bias whereas our ideology regards it as a social evil, individuals are more likely to respond by excluding the prohibited message from consciousness.

Devine 1989 (as cited in Blanton & Jaccard, 2008) carried out a remarkable research to study unconscious racial behaviors. The investigation involved a computer-based survey taken from randomly selected participants. The participants were shown words stereotypically associated with Black people for few seconds, which was followed by a jumble of words and letters. After this exposure, they were asked to read a passage that described a person who was unmistakably

engaged in hostile action while the race of this person was not mentioned. Participants, who were primed with stereotypical terms, interpreted the unambiguous action as aggressive. There are many commonly observed ‘blink of the eye’ attitudes that psychologists refer to as the consequence of unconscious bias. For instance, the experience of a black man narrated in Moule & Jean (2009, p. 321+) who entered in a store and the man beside him instinctively took out his wallet to check it. Even though such attitudes are invisible or negligible, particularly for those who commit them, they have a significant impact on the social relationships among people of different races. According to an investigative psychological study by Moule & Jean (2009) racial and ethnic stereotypes are erudite as part of usual socialization and are common among many communities and across time. A striking example of implicit bias is a recent event that reiterated Clark's classic doll study. In a video, filmed by a 17 year old media student and circulated widely through the media, a small black child visibly mirrors society's bias when he described the black doll as ‘bad’ looking and white doll as ‘good’. Another research by Duncan 1976 (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008) revealed how an ambiguous shove could seem violent if it is linked to a black individual as compared to a white actor. Till the 1970's little empirical work was done regarding attitude construct and prognostic validity of implicit racial attitudes. However, in the late 80's several researches took place to establish a system for measuring validity of attitudes and two empirically approved methods were developed; Implicit Association Test and Self-report (Greenwald et al, 2009). Several investigations have been conducted to analyze the automatic unconscious responses using IAT which establishes

the existence of unconscious prejudice that is one of the major reasons of modern subtle racism (Gawronski, 2002, p. 171). Empirical Evidences against Implicit Racial Attitudes There are significant percentage of scholars, psychologists and researchers who claim that racism still prevails in society but is now concealed under the blanket of unconscious prejudice. According to claims put forward by Blanton & Jaccard (2008), the concept of automatic racial attitudes rest on exceedingly aggressive interpretations of IATs. The IAT has been criticized for having methodological issues as it focuses on the time a participant takes to classify stimuli into categories after being explicitly exposed to black stereotypical terms (Gawronski, 2002). While Dr. Greenwald and his colleagues conclude that scores obtain through IAT are reliable and better assess racial bias, critics have rejected the findings ore scores of the studies by re-taking and reanalyzing the test results which demonstrate inconsistency and, in some cases, the total opposite of the original scores (Tierney, 2008). To prove the influence of unambiguous exposure to stereotypical terms on the responses of IAT participants, Fazio et al, 1995 (as cited in Blanton & Jaccard, 2008) formed a method known as affective priming. This method uses stimulating race primes to analyze the level to which race-based apexes facilitate the positive or negative responses. Studies have shown that individuals identify a word quickly if they are exposed to the pinnacle of the same valence instead of a contrasting valence. Hence, every individual has a psychological tendency to be influenced by a stimuli experience in full consciousness which raises question about the legitimacy of IAT test procedure. Devine’s investigation and many other similar researches that are presented as an evidence for the

existence of unconscious prejudice in a common man are all based on assessing racial attitudes after participants are given bias clues. If this logic is followed, the unconscious bias in a white man can easily be activated by interaction with a black man which in turn may cause them to have more negative perceptions about blacks as compared to their perception about whites. Conclusion Even though it is reasonable to conclude that people at times are unaware of the consequences of their attitudes, this argument alone is not sufficient to provide basis for proving that the racial attitudes of people are a result of their unconscious bias which they are not accountable or guilty for. But, to reject the fact that all stereotypical attitudes are works of the conscious self is not feasible either. It is an established fact that unconscious bias do exist with its roots connecting to cultural and communal beliefs and perceptions, no research or assessment method has been successful in providing evidence that everyday racial actions are a result of unconscious bias. IATs and self- reporting method does not provide reliable results that could draw a line between implicit racial behavior and conscious racism. Even the slightest variation in the use of reaction time data can have significant effect on an individual's IAT score which highlights IAT's unreliability. Hence there is a strong need to develop an empirical measurement system in which the chief methodological issues highlighted above are removed. References Blanton, H. & Jaccard, J. (2008). Unconscious racism: A concept in pursuit of measure. *The Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 34, pp. 277-97. Delgado, R. (1997). *Critical white studies*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Gawronski, B. (2002). What does the implicit association test measure? A test of the convergent and discriminant validity

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