

A critical review on unconscious racism



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Unconscious racism and implicit prejudice has received a great deal of attention in social psychology literature over the past several decades (Gawronski, Hofmann, & Wilbur, 2006). For the most part, this literature is founded on the premise that unconscious racism is related to internal attitudes and biases that are ignited automatically in response to relevant and/or ambiguous situations (Devine, 1989). However, some authors exhort that unconscious attitudes and prejudice are not actually unconscious, and that human beings may instead be limiting their awareness purposefully (Fazio et al, 1995; Arkes & Tetlock, 2004). Therefore, this paper is intended to review appropriate literature on this argument in order to answer; “ is unconscious racism unconscious?”

Social Cognition

Social psychology literature relates unconscious racism to the process of social cognitions (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008). Therefore, to best understand unconscious racism, it is important to first consider the foundational components of human social cognition.

Core Processes of Cognition

Social cognition encompasses four core processes: attention, interpretation, judgment, and memory. In their most basic forms, these core processes can be described as: (1) attention – the process of consciously focusing on one’s self or the environment; (2) interpretation – the meanings we associate with those events and experiences; (3) judgment – the process by which people interpret information and make impressions in order to make decisions; and (4) memory – the process of storing and retrieving the processes of attention, interpretation and judgment so that we can later use this

information to guide future social cognitive processes (Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2002).

Linking these social cognitive components to humankind's ability to understand of their surroundings, literature proposes that people need simplified mental representations (schemata) to deal with the social world (Kang, 2009). Kang (2009) explained that schemas allow people to make quick judgments about situations, which may be adaptive evolutionarily as self-preservation or protection of young. However, Kang also explained that schemas may distort human perceptions because they come from personal experiences with other people, some of which are direct (i. e., real-world encounters), and most of which are vicarious (i. e., relayed to us through stories, books, movies, media, and culture). Literature exhorts that these mental pictures are so powerful that they may be activated without the person's conscious control or awareness (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). Unconscious awareness is believed to be directly related to the use of schemata and mental shortcuts (Conrey, Gawronski, Sherman, & Hugenberg, 2005). Therefore, it is important to explore ways in which unconscious racism is influenced by implicit attitudes and prejudice and conscious awareness, as well as the extent to which these connections are supported by empirical evidence.

Automatic and Controlled Processing

Payne and Gawronski (in press) explored the issue of unconscious racism as subcomponent of implicit social cognition, explaining that seminal writing on implicit racism is rooted in theories of cognition that do not effectively integrate unconsciousness as a form of racist attitudes. They contended that

the issue of unconscious racism may lie in the mixed researched results between automatic and controlled cognitive processing.

Literature defines controlled processes as, “demanding attention, limited in capacity, and voluntarily initiated and altered”, whereas, automatic processing is defined as, “needing little attention, unlimited in capacity, and difficult to suppress voluntarily” (Payne & Gawronski, p. 2). These definitions relate to Bargh’s (1994) “four horsemen” of automaticity: awareness, efficiency, intention, and control. Central to Bargh’s theory is the presence of conscious awareness, which aligns the need for consciousness with racist attitudes and, therein, consciousness with behaviors (Macrea & Bodenhausen, 2005). Research on attention supports the role of consciousness by reporting associations between the strength of attitudes and automatic processing (Fazio et al, 1995). Hence, research on attention and attitudes argues against unconsciousness and attitudes, suggesting that unconscious racism may in fact be conscious and accessible.

Implicit Attitudes and Prejudice

Literature suggests that unconscious racism may stem from prejudicial attitudes. Gawronski, Hofmann, and Wilbur (2006) contended that unconscious racism can be explored by examining three dimensions of (un)awareness: (1) source awareness, (2) content awareness, (3) impact awareness. Each one of these dimensions relates to underlying attitudes people hold surrounding ambiguous situations.

Attitudes

Source awareness. Previous research on source awareness suggests that people may lack conscious awareness of the causes of their attitudes (Gawronski et al, 2006). Studies examining source awareness have investigated the extent to which people are aware of “ why” they have certain preferences or feelings. Citing, Zajon (1968) Gawronski and colleagues (2006) related explorations of source awareness to the mere exposure effect. Mere exposure studies have shown that prior exposure to an object can enhance self-reported liking of that object. Furthermore, participants in these studies were typically unaware that prior exposure influenced their attitudes (e. g., Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980). In other words, the participants showed increased liking for the object in question even though they did not know why they liked it, which indicates that source awareness was present and that the mere exposure effect may work on unconscious processes.

Other examples of lack of source awareness include studies on introspection (Kang, 2009). Wilson and colleagues argued that people often have no introspective access to the causes of their attitudes (e. g., Wilson, Dunn, Kraft, & Lisle, 1989). Literature explains that when people are asked to indicate why they like or dislike an object, they often come up with reasons that do not match the real causes (Gawronski et al, 2006). Gawronski and colleagues explained that if this happens before people were required to make a decision between two or more objects, these decisions often differed from those without prior introspection about reasons (e. g., Wilson & Schooler, 1991), and such changes in preference may have reduced

subsequent satisfaction with the decision (e. g., Wilson et al., 1993).

Similarly, the findings by Wilson and colleagues indicates that people may not have conscious access to the causes of their attitudes, and that introspection about the reasons for their attitudes may lead them to make ill-advised choices rather than foster self-awareness.

Literature argues that these attitudes differ from self-reported attitudes primarily with regard to their source, such that indirect attitude measures are likely to reflect evaluations for which people lack source awareness (Gawronski et al, 2006). For this review, it can therefore be reasoned that unconscious racism may be dependent upon a person's level of introspection and their source awareness.

Content awareness. Researchers often argue about the extent to which people are able to show positive or negative reactions toward an object without being consciously aware of their evaluative responses (Wilson, 2002). In addition, it is often argued that indirect attitude measures reflect a particular class of attitudes that people are generally unaware (Gawronski et al, 2006). Gawronski and colleagues explained that a widespread assumption in research on racial prejudice is that indirect attitude measures assess unconscious negative evaluations of racial minority groups, and that these evaluations are generally inaccessible to introspection (e. g., Banaji, 2001). Gawronski and colleagues (2006) reported that this conclusion is based on the finding that indirect attitude measures are typically weakly correlated with standard self-report measures. They argued, therefore, that indirect measures capture attitudes that are unconscious in nature, but that self-report measures may not be tapping into authentic unconscious processes

(Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). For this critique, it can then be reasoned that unconscious racism may be implicit, but that researchers cannot measure nor observe these racist attitudes effectively.

Impact awareness. Literature explains that people are often unaware of the influence a given attitude has on other psychological processes. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) claimed that people generally lack introspective access to higher-order mental processes. Therefore, if people suspect a biasing influence on their judgments or behavior, they have to rely on naive causal theories in order to correct for this influence (Strack, 1992; Wegener & Petty, 1997; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Similar to the judgment imposed on general social cognition, as discussed earlier, Wegener and Petty (1997) report that processes of judgmental correction often depend on the specific theory people hold about how a given factor influences their judgments (e. g., Petty & Wegener, 1993; Wegener & Petty, 1995). What this indicates is that judgmental correction can reduce bias. However, Gawronski et. al (2006) express concern for the inaccuracy of this assumption, contending that there is potential that judgmental correction can exacerbate bias (e. g., overcorrection, correction in the wrong direction) and indirectly reinforce unhealthy prejudice. Thus, if applied to the present critique, it can be argued that indirectly assessed attitudes influence other psychological processes that are outside conscious awareness which can lead to prejudicial or racist behaviors and judgments even when people are highly self-monitoring.

Gawronski and colleagues (2006) explain that these three dimensions are intertwined, which suggests that though people may maintain some awareness of racist attitudes (e. g. lack of content awareness), they may not

know the origin of the attitude (e. g. lack of source awareness), nor possess the knowledge about how the attitude influences other psychological processes (e. g. lack of impact awareness). Gawronski and colleagues state that both awareness of the source and awareness of the impact of an attitude logically depend on a person's awareness of the attitudes itself (e. g. consciousness). Gawronski, Geschke, and Banse (2003) give an example of this process, stating that “ an individual may be consciously aware of his or her attitude toward Black people, but he or she may be unaware of how these reactions influence the interpretation of ambiguous behavior”.

Integrating the various types of awareness into the present argument, it can be reasoned that for some people, particularly those low in introspection, limited awareness of prejudicial attitudes possessed, and therefore, unconscious processes are at play. Similarly, these various forms of awareness also suggest that better understanding the interplay between source, content and impact awareness will likely give researchers a more thorough understanding of unconscious racism. Gawronski et al (2006) exhorted that the most important tasks in prejudice and stereotyping research has been to develop measures that are able to effectively capture the various strengths and awareness of human associations.

Implicit Association Test (IAT)

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is cited in the literature as being the most widely used and most controversial measure of implicit attitudes (Gawronski, 2000). Developed by Greenwald and colleagues (1989) the IAT is

based on a double task in which participants are asked to assign single stimuli as fast as possible to a given pair of target categories. Associative strength between two concepts is assessed by combining a given target dimension with an associated attribute dimension, both in an association-consistent and an association-inconsistent manner. The difference between the response latencies for association-consistent and association-inconsistent assignments is interpreted as an indicator for a participant's idiosyncratic associative strength between the two concepts (Gawronski, 2000).

In their review of common theoretical components cited as the foundations of implicit prejudice, Arkes and Tetlock (2004) identified three mechanisms that relate to the cognitive bases for the affective priming and Implicit Association Test (IAT) results: (1) association, (2) response competition, and (3) cultural stereotypes.

Association mechanisms. Arkes and Tetlock (2004) explain that the association mechanism is based on the assumption that related items are located closer together in semantic memory than are unrelated items. Thus, if a person has a close association between negative words and words linked to a minority group, then words drawn from these two categories will be jointly accessed more quickly than would words drawn from a positive list and the same minority-group category. This differential reaction time is the index of implicit prejudice, and suggests that basic human cognitive processes are unconscious.

Response mechanisms. Arkes and Tetlock describe the response mechanism as being, “predicated on the fact that as soon as one is exposed to the first of two stimuli, one’s reaction to that stimulus is initiated” (p. 4). This means that people are naturally primed from social, and artificial, cues to link various concepts and respond accordingly. Arkes and Tetlock reported that response mechanisms relate to studies that have found that positive words, following a White face, are responded to more quickly by Whites than are positive words following an African-American face. Presumably among White participants in such research, the responses to a positive word and a White face both require the same categorization response, whereas the responses to a positive word and an African-American face do not (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004; Dasgupta, McGhee, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2000). Arkes and Tetlock argue that such cognitive responses can be both conscious and beyond awareness.

Association and response mechanisms. The associative and response competition mechanisms are both predicated on the core assumption that the people exhibiting prejudiced data maintain at some level the negative attitudes uncovered by either the affective priming or IAT procedures (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004). Arkes and Tetlock explained that, due to the fact that the prejudice uncovered by these techniques is implicit, negative attitudes might not be consciously affirmed or openly endorsed during testing situations. Their argument speaks to a dual process occurring during testing -that implicit attitudes may exist, and the reality that people generally see themselves in a positive light and are unable to accurately express or identify their own negative or racist thoughts and behaviors. Arkes and

Tetlock stated that, “ in the implicit prejudice literature, the prejudicial attitude needs to be understood as occurring at some deeper level-perhaps not easily accessible to consciousness-of psychological functioning”. The question then becomes, how then, can implicit procedure separate human social desirability from prejudicial reports? (Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000).

For this review, Arkes and Tetlock’s (2004) discussion of IAT mechanisms appears to equally weight the possibility that unconscious racism can exist and cannot exist. In essence, it appears to be difficult to separate authentic human processing from human awareness and defenses. Other literature supports Arkes and Tetlock’s contentious views on implicit association measures, many citing response interference, social desirability, and rationalized racism as being central to the unconscious – conscious debate (Granowski, 2000; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004).

Unconscious Racism

Dovidio and Gaertner (2004) support the idea that people may be unaware of their racist viewpoints by conceptualizing unconscious racism as “ rationalized racism.” Referencing their 1977 study, Dovidio and Gaertner explained that Whites will act in a racist manner if they can maintain the belief that their actions were due to some other cause. In essence, racism emerges when White individuals can rationalize their behavior to themselves, suggesting that people are aware of their prejudicial and racist beliefs. In further discussion on this debate, Blanton and Jaccard contend that the answer to “ what is unconscious racism” depends on how unconsciousness is defined.

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Defining Unconscious

In a review of relevant sociology literature, Blanton and Jaccard identify three definitions of unconscious that are believed to apply to unconscious racism:

1) unconsciousness stems from unknown effects; 2) unconsciousness stems from unknown causes; and 3) unconsciousness stems from inaccessible attitudes.

Unknown effects. The idea that the unconscious comes from unknown effects suggests that individuals lack awareness of the effects their own actions have on other people. Blanton and Jaccard explained that when framed in terms of unconscious racism, this definition indicates that people are generally unwittingly promoting racial disparities and institutional racism. Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) related this process of unawareness to sociology theories of institutional and systemic racism. As a theoretical framework, this definition suggests that people may become so embedded within racial institutions that they become unaware of their surroundings, and they may fail to see ways in which their own actions uphold social norms related to inequity. In addition, this definition implies a sense of symbolic racism, which is described by Sears and Kinder (1971) as being the view that individual behaviors endorse American values of individualism and self-reliance. Blanton and Jaccard argued that for White individuals, acts of symbolic racism serve as reinforcers of “the American Dream” and racial disparities.

Unknown causes. The second definition, that the unconscious stems from unknown causes, suggests that people may lack the conscious capacity to access their own racist learning, and that they, therefore, may fail to

recognize their own racial preferences. Blanton and Jaccard contend that people are racists if they are unable to access the determinants of their own action. Literature detailing impression formation offers support for this definition. Kunda and Thagard (1996) suggest that in ambiguous situations, social stereotypes fill in meaning gaps, causing racist reactions to seem objective and justified.

Subliminal priming. Literature on subliminal priming supports the presence of active stereotyping outside of conscious awareness (Devine, 1989). In his foundational study, Devine used computer-based tasks to subliminally prime participants with words related to black stereotypes (1989). Words were presented to participants in quick intervals of around 80 milliseconds. After exposure to the words, Devine had participants read a paragraph describing a person in an ambiguous hostile situation. Afterward participants were asked the level of hostility present in the scenario. Though participants were not provided the race of the person described, when primed with the black stereotype words beforehand, participants described the scenario as being more hostile than participants who had not been primed with black stereotype words. Devine's study provide empirical support for the tendency for individuals to hold racial biased perceptions. These findings further indicate that if people can be primed by brief exposure to racial words, then it may be likely that they hold similar racial biases and perceptions when influenced by racial stereotypes present in their daily lives (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008).

Inaccessible attitudes. The third definition identified by Blanton and Jaccard (2008), the unconscious stems from inaccessible attitudes, is considered to

be the most contentious and least evidence-based theory of unconscious racism. This definition rests on the premise that people possess views that they are unable to perceive. Blanton and Jaccard reported being skeptical of how such a phenomenon may arise, “ what is the evidence for this third type of unconscious racism? – ignorance about the presence of racist attitudes?” (p. 281). It is also worth noting that this definition most resembles the “ learned privilege” theory offered by the field of counseling psychology, which purports that awareness is present and that people can access their prejudicial attitudes and biases if they can accept their feelings of denial and guilt (Helms, 1995). For a full review on learned privilege see Rothenberg (2005).

Discussion

The major goal of the paper was to review the available evidence pertaining to whether certain aspects of unconscious racism are truly implicit and void of conscious awareness, as is often claimed in research using indirect attitude measures (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Thus, before labeling indirect racist attitudes as “ unconscious,” it is important to state (1) which particular aspect of attitudes is deemed unconscious, and (2) whether there is empirical evidence that confirms or disconfirms this assertion. Conclusions that can be drawn from the present review indicate that there is evidence that points to unconscious awareness of racist ideations. However, literature also suggests that evidence is equivocal, and that each of the three features has not received equal support.

The following three conclusions are asserted in this critique:

(1) Unconscious attitudes cannot be effectively measured and quantified. IAT are arguably able to capture some component of cognitive process, and likely social cognition. However, priming techniques and self-report measures have been found to confound implicit results. In addition, there is enough error in IAT investigations that future measures and research are needed to support the presence of unconscious racism. At this time in research history, there is limited evidence that unconscious attitudes can be accurately measured without interference. There is evidence, however, that suggests that human awareness may vary according to situation, social cues and basic human introspection.

Therefore, the second conclusion is:

(2) Racist ideations may exist that are beyond human awareness. Literature, including theoretical definitions and research findings, suggests that racist ideations, attitudes and prejudice may be beyond human awareness. Evidenced specifically by research on implicit attitudes and automatic processing, it is likely that human beings lack both the capacity and, potentially the desire, to access racist thoughts. This does not, however, suggest that unconsciousness is real. Literature continues to be in conflict over the processes underlying unconsciousness.

Therefore, the third conclusion is:

(3) Further research is needed to investigate the overlap between self-constructed “ mental blocks” and authentic unconscious racism. Though unconscious racism appears to be moderately supported across literature and research studies, the origins of unconscious processes has not been

adequately addressed. Future research would benefit from examining the extent to which mental blocks, such as guilt and denial play a role in defending against morally unsound ideas, such as racist thoughts, compared to authentic unconsciousness. The question remains, “ why is there an unconscious? – is it personally constructed or biologically?”

These three conclusions can be used to critique, explore, and begin to answer the foundational question of this paper, “ is unconscious racism actually unconscious?” Organizing current literature on unconscious racism according to “ support” versus “ reject” unconscious processes, it appears that unconsciousness may in fact play a central role in racist ideas, attitudes, and, potentially, behaviors (See Table 1). However, major gaps continue to weaken arguments for unconscious racism as an authentic human cognitive process. Therefore, this writer suggests that the term “ unconscious” be used with caution and that researchers specify and integrate the type of awareness they are measures (source, content, impact), the type of cognitive processing they are examining (automatic or controlled), and the techniques being used to investigate implicit mechanisms (self-report, IAT, subliminal priming). Furthermore, because literature has failed to reach a sound conclusion about the existence of authentic unconscious processes, it is recommended that researchers take a logical positivist stance in order to appropriately reject or support the unconscious/conscious theory and debate.

Table 1: Perspectives on Unconscious Processes

Support

Reject

Automatic Processing – definition

Source Awareness (Gawronski et al., 2006)

Exposure Effect (Kunst -Wilson & Zajonc, 1980)

Introspection Studies (Wilson et al., 1989)

Content Awareness (Gawronski et al., 2006)

Implicit Attitudes (Banaji, 2001)

Impact Awareness (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977)

IAT Mechanisms (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004)

Rationalized Racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004)

Unknown Causes -definition of unconscious (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967)

Subliminal Priming (Devine, 1989)

Controlled Processing – definition

Theories of Social Cognition (Payne & Gawronski)

Bargh's 4 Horseman of Automaticity

Attention Research (Fazio et al, 1995)

In Accessible Attitudes (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008)

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Conclusion

In summary, this writer proposes that unconscious racism exist to the extent that it is theoretically, empirically, and rationally supported. Research on implicit attitudes, bias and racism supports unconscious processes indicating that unconscious racism may underlie many overt and covert racist and prejudicial behaviors. Conversely, once awareness or questioning of unconscious racist ideas begins, this writer proposes that awareness takes over and social cognitive processes are no longer “unconscious” or without control. In conclusion, because unconscious racism is both supported and rejected in the literature, further research is needed to continue the investigation of unconscious processes, implicit measures, and quantifiable means of accessing thoughts that are beyond human awareness.