



Implicit racial bias and prosocial behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports results of an experiment on the relationship between whites' implicit racial bias and prosocial behavior toward blacks. We hypothesized that implicit anti-black bias would lead to less prosocial behavior (generosity with limited monetary resources). Consistent with our hypothesis, the results revealed that implicit anti-black bias, measured by the Implicit Association Test, had a negative effect on generosity toward blacks. This finding extends prior work by showing that implicit racial bias affects *non-hypothetical* decisions about how to allocate limited monetary resources. We conclude with a discussion of implications and suggestions for future work.

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1. Introduction

Why do racial inequalities stubbornly persist despite the fact that Americans' racial attitudes have become increasingly egalitarian (Campbell, 1971; Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986; Karlines et al., 1969; Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005; Pager and Shepherd, 2008)? One explanation for this paradox is based on implicit anti-minority attitudes (Dunham et al., 2006; Gaertner and McLaughlin, 1983; Rudman et al., 2001). These attitudes, studied for several decades by psychologists, but scarcely addressed in other disciplines, differ from explicit racial attitudes captured by surveys in several important ways: they operate to a larger degree (though not completely) outside of conscious awareness and are typically not identified via introspection (e.g., Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Greenwald et al., 1998). Implicit anti-minority attitudes are widespread in America even among people who openly reject racism (Nosek et al., 2007).

A crucial assumption behind the claim that implicit racial attitudes buttress systemic racial inequalities is that these attitudes lead to observable actions that disadvantage minorities. Yet, evidence linking implicit attitudes to racially biased behavior is limited (McConnell and Leibold, 2001). Much of the existing research concentrates on responses to survey items or hypothetical scenarios, rather than actual, observed, behaviors. The behavioral evidence that does exist mostly pertains to spontaneous behaviors that are difficult to control, such as subtle non-verbal expressions of hostility in interracial interaction (Chen and Bargh, 1997; Fazio et al., 1995; Dovidio et al., 1997a,b, 2002). Less is known about the relationship between implicit racial attitudes and deliberate, more easily controllable actions, such as decisions about the allocation of material resources that may disadvantage minorities.

At the same time, some evidence suggests that implicit attitudes *in general* strongly predict controllable behaviors. Greenwald et al. (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of studies measuring implicit cognitions of race/ethnicity, gender, age, self-feelings, drugs/tobacco, relationships, and consumer, political, and clinical issues. On average, such broadly defined implicit cognitions predicted both difficult and easy to control behaviors (e.g., eye blinking vs. voting). While suggestive, this meta-analysis did not distinguish implicit racial attitudes from implicit attitudes toward other categories or objects. As a result, it remains unclear whether *racial* attitudes influence easily controllable behaviors.

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Given this suggestive, but inconclusive evidence, it is important to directly assess the impact of implicit racial attitudes (as opposed to implicit attitudes defined more broadly) on controllable (as opposed to spontaneous) behavior. Although the importance of spontaneous behaviors in interracial interaction should not be downplayed (Dovidio et al., 2002; Vorauer and Kumhyr, 2001; Chen and Bargh, 1997), the lack of evidence linking implicit racial attitudes to deliberate and controllable behavior is an important obstacle to an understanding whether and how such biases contribute to systemic inequalities.

The goal of this study is to provide such evidence by addressing the relationship between implicit racial attitudes and generosity. We measure this relationship in a controlled laboratory experiment, operationalizing generosity as a voluntary decision about how to distribute limited monetary resources between self and another person. This measure enables us to make several unique contributions, which we briefly discuss below.

First, generosity is a key type of *prosocial behavior*. Various forms of prosocial behavior, including generosity, altruism, fairness, and trust are critical for social interactions and social order in general and have therefore received extensive interdisciplinary attention (see, Piliavin and Charng, 1990 and Penner et al., 2005 for reviews). Here we address how implicit racial attitudes, a prevalent form of racial biases in contemporary society, affect prosociality.

Second, as noted earlier, little is known about the effects of implicit racial biases on *easily controllable behaviors*, as opposed to more spontaneous behaviors such as facial expressions or speech hesitations. Because inequality can stem from a range of controllable behaviors (e.g., hiring and salary decisions and distribution of scarce resources more generally), it is important to understand the impact of implicit cognition on such behaviors. Our measure of generosity, which has research participants decide how to distribute money between self and another person, may therefore yield insights into the role of such behaviors in ongoing racial inequalities.¹

Third, our dependent measure is an *observable and non-hypothetical behavior*, as opposed to survey responses or behaviors in hypothetical scenarios studied previously. We cannot assume that survey and hypothetical responses correspond to actual behavior (Ajzen et al., 2004; Bohm, 1972; Buchbinder et al., 2004; LaPierre, 1934; Murphy et al., 2005), and we currently have little evidence on whether implicit bias affects behavioral discrimination.

Finally, we focus on a type of behavior that has the potential to *tangibly disadvantage minorities*, as opposed to types of behavior that may affect minorities in more subtle ways, e.g., by exposing them to hostile non-verbal cues. We measure generosity with money, a highly valued resource. This is important, given that the denial of material resources based on race contributes to continuing race-based inequalities more generally.

The remainder of this paper describes implicit racial attitudes and reviews the limited available evidence linking them to behavior. Thereafter, we propose a hypothesis specifying how implicit racism affects the allocation of monetary resources toward blacks. We then present the results of a new experiment designed to test this hypothesis. As predicted, results show that whites with higher levels of implicit anti-black bias are less generous toward a black dependent other than are whites with lower levels of implicit bias.

2. What are implicit attitudes and how are they measured?

Implicit attitudes involve “the introspectively unidentified (or incorrectly identified) traces of past experience that mediate attributions of qualities to members of social categories” (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995, p. 15). They are activated from memory quickly and spontaneously by exposure to relevant stimulus cues in the environment (Wittenbrink et al., 2001). Implicit biases correlate only weakly to moderately with explicit attitudes (Nosek et al., 2007).

Implicit attitudes cannot be measured by standard attitudinal surveys that rely on the respondent’s capacity for introspection (Rudman et al., 2001). Researchers therefore developed several indirect means of capturing them. By far the most common method, and the one used in the current research, is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) developed by Greenwald and colleagues (1998). The logic of the IAT capitalizes on the well-established tendency for people to respond more quickly to concepts that are closely associated in their minds (e.g., Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Greenwald et al., 1998). The IAT can be used to measure attitudes toward a variety of topics. The version measuring racial attitudes tracks how quickly participants respond to images of black and white faces and value-laden words that correspond to concepts of “good” or “bad.” Differences in response latencies are taken as evidence of a stronger association between concepts. Most white participants respond much faster to a combination of a white face and a “good” word (or a black face and a “bad” word) compared to the “white/bad” or “black/good” combination (Greenwald et al., 1998), which suggests an implicit anti-black attitude. In fact, regardless of whether the IAT or another measure is used, results show that a majority of whites hold implicit biases against blacks (Devine, 1989; Devine et al., 2002; Dovidio et al., 1997a,b; Fazio et al., 1995). Whites show the highest levels of anti-black implicit attitudes but some degree of anti-black implicit bias is found also among American Indians, Asians, and Hispanics (Nosek et al., 2007).

Researchers have debated whether the IAT measures factors other than implicit bias. Critics have pointed to several potential influences on IAT results, including knowledge of cultural stereotypes, difference in familiarity with the ingroup vs. outgroup, and “statistical discrimination” (Arkes and Tetlock, 2004; Tetlock and Mitchell, 2008). A detailed review of this

¹ By claiming that generosity with monetary resources represents controllable behavior, we do not suggest that it is completely governed by conscious deliberation or that it is completely under rational control. By using the label “controllable,” we follow Greenwald et al. (2009) to distinguish behaviors that are relatively easy to control from those that are more difficult to control, such as facial expression, gesturing, and para-verbal aspects of speech.

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