



ARTICLES

Racism and the Narrative of Biological Inevitability

Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton & Amanda Danielle Perez

Artwork by Bayeté Ross Smith

As we approach the conclusion of the Obama presidency, it is ironic to think that it is bookended by two very different narratives around race. On the 2008 end, there were pronouncements of a “post-racial” America where the election of a black man to the presidency signaled that we had turned a corner towards egalitarianism and improved race relations.

ALMOST EIGHT YEARS LATER, the prevailing narrative is much different, poignantly summarized in one succinct phrase: Black Lives Matter. It is a reminder that legal—indeed human—rights continue to be differentially accorded to people based on their race, which perpetuates a culture of othering. In between those bookends, we have seen continuous reminders that law enforcement is one of the principal arenas where race-based injustice plays out—from the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to the killing of Trayvon Martin and debates about the reach of stand-your-ground laws, to the alarmingly consistent string of deaths of black women, youth, and men—Sandra Bland, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, India Kager, Tamir Rice—at the hands of police.

The seemingly irreconcilable nature of these realities, where we can have such injustices perpetrated against African Americans in a country that elected an African American man to its highest office, reflects a modern paradox that centers on the question of whether racism is a biological inevitability that will forever resurface, in spite of our nation’s best efforts. In the years since the 2010 publication of *Are We Born Racist? New Insights from Neuroscience and Positive Psychology*, co-edited by Mendoza-Denton, the notion of *implicit bias*—the automatic yet measurable associations that people have about others, and the behaviors that these associations unconsciously influence—has slowly gained traction to inform our understanding of modern racism. The fact that implicit bias occurs outside of our awareness but affects explicit behaviors, from pulling the trigger of a weapon to judging a resume to disciplining young children, can be highly threatening to people’s self-concept. This is particularly true among people who consider

themselves egalitarian. It triggers very personal questions about who one really is: “Does my having implicit bias invalidate my egalitarianism?” “Will other people think of me as racist?” “Am I, at a deep and unconscious level, immutably racist?”

New findings in neuroscience suggest that the answer might well be *no*.

Lay theories of racism

WHEN WE THINK OF “racists,” our minds do not conjure up subtleties. Rather, our imaginations jump to easy prototypes of overtly racist cops, like the one in the movie *Crash*, perhaps, or individuals like the character played by Edward Norton in *American History X*. Psychologists have labeled the type of racism depicted by these characters old-fashioned racism, in which a person’s prejudiced behavior mirrors their core beliefs and attitudes. This type of racism was characteristic of majority group members’ attitudes in the 1950’s. What current discussions about implicit bias recognize, however, is that people who hold a negative attitude or stereotype that is publicly frowned upon may feel

A more problematic kind of prejudice to make sense of is aversive racism, in which a person sincerely values egalitarianism yet engages in some kind of behavior that betrays bias—reflexively clutching one’s handbag as a black man walks by, a microaggression, even a weapon discharge.

social pressure not to admit or act on that stereotype and get “caught.” This is a situation in which people’s outward behavior may no longer correspond to their underlying beliefs. Social psychologists have labeled this duality as an external motivation to respond without prejudice, but the term “politically correct” comes readily to mind. It implies that egalitarian behavior is not real or truly felt, but instead put on for the sake of appearances to hide the monster underneath. This idea helps us explain the contradiction between outward behavior and inner attitude in a way easily understood by analogy to a costume. Through this lens, behavioral manifestations of racism demonstrate what a person is really like underneath the veneer of egalitarianism. In this conceptualization, evidence of racism invalidates all efforts towards egalitarianism as mere cover-up, not only in others but in ourselves as well.

A more problematic kind of prejudice to make sense of is aversive racism, in which a person sincerely values egalitarianism yet engages in some kind of behavior that betrays bias—reflexively clutching one’s handbag as a black man walks by, a microaggression, even a weapon discharge. The research literature on implicit bias is helpful in understanding this paradox, since it explains biased behavior in terms of automatic processes that occur largely outside of consciousness. By situating the study of bias within the narrative of unconscious vs. conscious processes, however, we also situate the study of bias within a long tradition of dual process models of behavior, which may unwittingly give the impression that bias and racism is more immutable and biologically determined than it may actually be.

The intractable unconscious— the influence of Sigmund Freud

THE LEGACY OF SIGMUND Freud has penetrated so deeply into our popular culture in part because it provided a way to explain the tensions and paradoxes that characterize human behavior. In fact, much of the popular fascination with Freud is due to the fact that he attempted to explain seemingly inexplicable behavior on the basis of unconscious motivations buried deep inside our psyches. Many people now are familiar with the Id, the Ego, and the Superego, which Freud proposed as a kind of multi-stage model of behavioral regulation.

The Id represented that part of us that is primitive, crude, and cave-man-like, with base desires and wants in need of regulation by the Ego and Superego for proper functioning in civilized society. In our popular culture, the Id is understood to house our deepest, most animal desires -- for food, for sex, for aggression-- and the other systems work hard to cover, displace, or translate those base desires into more acceptable forms. Woven into this narrative is the idea that the Id represents an evolutionarily earlier time of human history- the caveman within us-- and the superego a more evolved, sophisticated form. Paradoxical behavior is explained as the observable collateral damage from the battles between the Id and the Superego. It is a rich and vivid model to explain the handbag clutch, the microaggression, and the weapon discharge in people who disavow racism.

In the same way that we might see a Freudian slip as a peek into one’s *true* feelings or a dream interpretation as the truest road into our most deep-seated fantasies, so are unconscious biases often seen as yielding an x-ray into our souls, a barometer of how racist a person really and truly is. We tend

Primitive/modern; Early/late; automatic/controlled; emotion/cognition; id/superego—our explanations of racism have to date fallen neatly into well-worn dualist narratives of how our minds work.

to see unconscious bias as constituting our truest, deepest motivations—who we really are underneath the dress-up of the controlled public response. As such, what really “counts” towards whether one is racist or not is not the egalitarian motivation or behavior, but rather the bias beneath.

And so the notion of doing or saying something that might reveal one’s true racist tendencies leads people to avoid situations in which they might be somehow caught off guard, saying or doing things that might be considered racist. This process is extremely aversive, placing people under the threat that they might themselves confirm a stereotype of being racist. The behavioral consequences include avoidance of situations where one might say something racist, as well as spending undue time in interracial interactions monitoring one’s behavior to the detriment of the interaction itself. People end up being, and appearing, deeply uncomfortable in interracial interactions, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Neuroscience adds to the dualist narrative

IN RECENT DECADES, A literature in neuroscience has conformed to an astonishingly similar dualist narrative, in which a primitive part of our brains -- the limbic system-- is literally covered and regulated by a more recently evolved neocortex that makes us uniquely human. Indeed, we now often hear descriptions of the limbic system as our “primate brain” that responds to environmental cues with the same level of sophistication as an ape might muster. Lightning quick and outside of our control, the limbic system has been called the seat of our fight-or-flight responses, which presumably kept our furry hides alive in the prehistoric dawn of time. A central player in this primate narrative is the amygdala, a pair of almond like structures that forms part of the limbic system. Early findings that the amygdala responds strongly to fear conditioning led to an understanding of the amygdala as the “first stop” of environmental danger cues in the brain, the structure that sets in motion the fight or flight response.

A significant chapter in our understanding of implicit bias was written with findings showing differential amygdala activation for faces of different



Bayeté Ross Smith | Our Kind of People

racism, as well as findings showing a relationship between levels of implicit bias and amygdala activity. These findings have fueled a conception of implicit bias as not only unconscious and automatic, but additionally as part of our prehistoric heritage—biologically determined and woven tightly within our DNA, with our only hope being to contain it but never to realistically “fix” it. Primitive/modern; Early/late; automatic/controlled; emotion/cognition; id/superego—our explanations of racism have to date fallen neatly into well-worn dualist narratives of how our minds work.

Challenging the dualist narrative

DESPITE THE PULL OF the dualist narrative, recent research is beginning to challenge the core assumptions of this narrative, and in so doing is allowing us to understand racism not as biological destiny, but as social construction that can be changed.

Once again, the amygdala plays a central role. Researchers are beginning to show that the amygdala, rather than responding exclusively to negative or fear-inducing stimuli to trigger a fight-or-flight response, instead seems to be exquisitely sensitive to affectively important information in the environment. This is a subtle but important difference, and suggests that the amygdala’s response may depend on the task or the situation at hand. In one study, for example, when researchers had participants rate the negativity of a set of faces, the amygdala tracked the negativity judgments nicely, which is consistent with prior findings. However, when the task was to judge the positivity



It changes our view of having to effortfully overcome our base racial biases, to a more hopeful possibility: that one day we may redefine our social environment so that it doesn't put social significance around race.

of the same faces, the amygdala *also* tracked those responses. In yet a third condition, when respondents were asked to use a scale that was anchored by both positive and negative endpoints, the amygdala ended up tracking the overall intensity of the responses.

In another study, researchers had participants sort a set of identical faces. In one condition the participants had to sort the faces according to race; in the other the participants had to sort the faces according to an arbitrarily assigned team membership. Again, across both conditions, the amygdala tracked the relevant group membership that had been flagged for the particular task in front of them, not just the race information. This finding suggests that race is not necessarily privileged by the amygdala as a fear-inducing or evolutionarily significant feature of humans *per se*, but instead a socially significant basis for group categorization. Importantly, group categorizations are socially constructed, and these findings begin to shape a new narrative around racism, its origins, and its antidotes.

These findings are interesting in two ways. First, of course, they challenge the notion that the amygdala only tracks fear-related stimuli. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, they begin to disrupt the very notion of a dualistic brain system, where one part (the limbic system) responds to basic,



Bayeté Ross Smith | Our Kind of People



low-level stimuli, and the more recently evolved one (the neocortex) is in charge of higher level processes, such as responding to different rating scales or differentiating between members of socially fabricated teams.

According to the dualistic model, we used to consider the processing of environmental features associated with the limbic system, such as basic emotions, part of our shared human heritage honed over millions of years. The evidence suggested that race was part of that heritage too, but scientists are now coming to a different conclusion. Rather than processing stimuli in the world serially, it seems that the brain processes information about the world in parallel, with top-level features (e.g., team membership) influencing the processing of low-level features (e.g., face information). This is a monumental shift in the way that we think about information processing and the brain more generally. An increasingly accepted view is no longer that certain brain regions are associated with specific tasks, and that some features are more automatic than others. Rather, science is now beginning to recognize that the brain is interconnected, processing information in parallel. Whole-brain processing, you might call it.

Racism: from biological inevitability to malleable social construction

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS of this new way of thinking and conceptualizing brain function for our understanding of prejudice and how we can address it? At its most basic level, a new understanding of the brain not as an onion-like organ that reveals the layers of our evolution helps us recognize the possibility that the brain is interconnected. As such, the structure of the brain may not mirror the traditional distinction between low-level, automatic processes, and those processes that are more top-down, controlled, or “evolved.” To the degree that we conceptualize processing of race as an automatic process, we may be mistakenly thinking of it as innate, or something we are born with-- something that can, at best, only be covered up.

Findings showing that even the most automatic of processes are modulated by top-level processes are profound because they reaffirm that when we see evidence that race is processed automatically, it doesn’t mean that it is a biological inevitability. Rather, it reaffirms that the brain adjusts to quickly process information that is deemed socially relevant, and as such it is within our power to redefine what is socially relevant. It changes our view of having to effortfully overcome our base racial biases, to a more hopeful possibility:

that one day we may redefine our social environment so that it doesn't put social significance around race.

We see evidence of this around us, albeit in social environments that are temporary. When we are cheering for the home team, for example, our social environment is engineered so that this category membership (home team) is what becomes salient, and our brain activity is marshaled to act on that information. When we travel to another country and meet someone from our same town, that shared social identity is tracked by our brains. Psychologists have known for a long time that our social categorizations are fluid, such that the same person can be considered an in-group member (e.g. countryman, fellow human) or an out-group member (different team, different race). These categorizations have been found to affect how we treat other people, how much we share with them, and our attitudes towards them. Brain science is now catching up to this work to lend credence to the idea that we are not replacing automatic impulses with mental tricks. Rather, the mental "tricks" are themselves part of our evolutionary heritage, and may be part of the adaptations that have made us so successful as a species.

To effectively improve race relations between police departments and communities, we must go after institutional reform, rather than focus on attempts to get rid of the few "bad apples." We must look at the apple barrel itself.

This does not mean that automatic or implicit biases do not exist. Rather, it changes our way of approaching them, so that instead of asking the question of whether a person is or is not racist, we can now think of the ways in which we might engineer our social environment to address racism, without thinking that it's a blanket fix for what is ultimately biologically unavoidable.

Systems-level Transformation

LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES IN the United States are an obvious arena where engineering our environment is necessary. In 2015, 1140 people¹ were killed by police officers in the United States. Racially, African Americans are overrepresented among those killed by police officers, and this finding is more pronounced when looking at the numbers of unarmed people killed.

In order to effectively address the issue of racially biased policing, it is necessary to make two clarifications. First, implicit bias is not limited to ill-intentioned racist police officers. Rather, implicit bias is an issue that seeps into the human condition, and even well-intentioned police officers are susceptible to it just like anybody else. Second, to effectively improve race relations between police departments and communities, we must go after institutional reform, rather than focus on attempts to get rid of the few “bad apples.” We must look at the apple barrel itself.

Creating policies that address the impact of implicit biases on policing is one path to institutional reform. The Oakland Police Department, for example, has enacted a policy change for foot patrols to combat the problem of unchecked implicit biases influencing officer reactions. This policy requires officers to wait for backup when following a suspect into a backyard, to avoid a confrontation with heightened emotionality.

In addition to policies, it is important to focus on police department training that would help officers learn to recognize and accept their own implicit biases. One current re-training program, Fair and Impartial Policing (FIP), focuses on breaking the initial defensive and hostile reactions surrounding this topic, and working to have officers identify the roots of their bias. A main goal of FIP is to have officers acknowledge and weaken their implicit associations between African Americans and crime. To date, 250 agencies have employed FIP training. The Richmond, CA Police Department, which has undergone FIP training, has been nationally praised recently for its effective community policing. The Richmond Police Department has increased the diversity of its new police hires; officer involvement in fatal shootings is rare; and overall crime rates have dropped.

This type of training has been shown to be most effective when community members and police officers work hand-in-hand to learn about reducing and managing their biases. Importantly, it shows that changes in biased behavior is possible through structural change. Going back to our bad-apples-versus-bad-barrel metaphor, it is necessary to discuss when and where these changes should be implemented. If trainings and policies are only instituted in areas with instances of racialized police brutality, then once again only the bad apples are being treated. Rather, to treat the barrel as a whole, reforms need to be implemented system-wide. Such reforms also send a clear message that the institution of law enforcement is committed to working towards equitable policing.

It is important to note that this reasoning does not excuse the behaviors of police officers involved in unjust police brutality, which in turn has led to an ongoing climate of rising hostility between police officers and the communities they serve. Hostile police officer-community relations lead to feelings of othering and perpetuates an “us versus them” mentality. These hostile

relations, borne out of the consequences of implicit biases, are important to focus on due to the high cost of human lives at stake.

We cannot afford to deny or excuse implicit bias on the basis of its biological inevitability.

Learn about your own potential biases: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

FIP: <http://www.fairimpartialpolicing.com/>

REFERENCES

- 1 “The Counted: people killed by police in the United States” interactive | US news | The Guardian.
<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>