Negrophobia and Reasonable Racism

Armour, Jody David

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combating the unconscious discrimination tendencies that lurk in us all.

**Proving Ubiquitous Unconscious Bias**

Given a sensory input with equally good fit to two nonoverlapping categories, the more accessible of the two categories would “capture” the input.


It is widely believed that our judgments and memories of others turn on whatever information about them has been made available to us. But if information alone were sufficient to determine our social judgments, then reasonable people who are exposed to the same information about someone should form the same judgments. Yet, people often form different judgments and recollect different facts, even when exposed to the same information. Thus, in addition to information from the environmental and social context, the perceiver’s cognitive structures and processes must also determine his or her social judgments. The following question therefore arises: What are these processes and what implications do they carry for social judgments of Blacks and other stereotyped groups?

Social cognition researchers conceptualize the process that underlies the perception of persons as a categorization process. We must categorize to make sense of the “buzzing, blooming confusion” of stimuli that bombard us every waking moment. Attempting to deal with every event on an individual basis would rapidly overwhelm our brain’s limited capacity to process information. Thus, a person who is asked to judge another’s behavior must first take whatever information she receives about the other’s behavior and interpret, or *encode*, this behav-
ior by assigning it to a category. Social and personal categories include information about social groups (e.g., Blacks, women, gays, and lesbians), social roles and occupations (e.g., spouses, maids, police officers), traits and behaviors (e.g., hostile, crime prone, patriotic, and intelligent), and social types (e.g., intellectuals, social activists, and rednecks). Once the behavior is assigned to one of these categories, it is stored in memory, from which it subsequently can be retrieved to make further inferences and predictions about the person.

When individuals must judge another’s behavior, however, they are unlikely to perform an exhaustive search of memory for all potentially relevant categories, compare the behavior to each such category, and then characterize the behavior in terms of the category with the best “fit.” Rather, they are likely to base their judgment on the category that happens to be the most readily accessible at the time the information is received. Consider the following example:

[Just after viewing an extremely violent film in which a heartless mugger preys upon innocent travelers of the city streets, a moviegoer would have a greater than usual tendency to perceive the behavior of a stranger who bumps into him or her as reflecting hostility or aggressiveness. Alternatively, after viewing a comedy featuring the inept Inspector Clouseau, the moviegoer might be more likely to perceive the identical social interaction in terms of the stranger’s clumsiness. In each example, the film preceding the interaction “primed” particular cognitive categories that subsequently influenced the interpretation of the incident.

Numerous studies confirm this intuitive account of the tendency of the mind to form social judgments by having incom-
ing information about people “captured” by the mental category that is most accessible because of “priming.” One classic study posited that unobtrusively exposing subjects to certain personality trait terms in one exercise would activate, or prime, the categories to which these terms referred, making it more likely the subjects would use the categories to characterize a person in an unrelated context. To test this hypothesis, subjects were asked to perform a complex cognitive task that momentarily exposed them to several trait terms. Later, in what ostensibly was an unrelated experiment on reading comprehension, the subjects read a paragraph about a target person, which was ambiguous as to his likability. After reading the passage, subjects characterized the target person in their own words. As predicted, subjects who were unobtrusively exposed to favorable trait terms tended to use those terms or their synonyms in characterizing the target, while subjects exposed to unfavorable terms tended to use those terms or their synonyms in their characterizations. In contrast, control subjects that researchers exposed to trait terms that were not applicable to interpreting the target’s behavior did not vary systematically in their characterizations.

These results carry enormous implications for judgments and evaluations of stereotyped groups. If cues of group membership such as race serve to prime trait categories such as hostility, people will systematically view behaviors by members of certain racial groups (e.g., Blacks) as more menacing than the same behaviors by members of other racial groups (e.g., Whites). Thus, Whites will interpret the same ambiguous shove as hostile or violent when an actor is Black, and as “playing around” or “dramatizing” when the actor is White. Category accessibility best explains this differential perception of violence.
as a function of the protagonist’s race: the presence of the Black actor primed the stereotype of Blacks, and since the stereotype associates Blacks with violence, the violent-behavior category was more accessible when interpreting behavioral information about Blacks than Whites. These findings have been replicated in studies of schoolchildren. Both Black and White children rated ambiguously aggressive behaviors (e.g., bumping in the hallway) of Black actors as being more mean or threatening than the same behaviors of White actors.

Although race clearly influences category accessibility, it remains unclear whether the influence is unconscious or conscious. It is possible that upon noticing the racial identity of the Black protagonist, the observers of the ambiguous shove (or some percentage of them) formed a conscious expectation for instances of trait categories stereotypically associated with Blacks (e.g., hostile, prone to violence). Indeed, research indicates that expecting to see an instance of a trait category increases the likelihood that a person will process ambiguous information by putting it into that category.

On the other hand, the observers (or some percentage of them) could have been sincerely nonprejudiced and refrained from consciously forming any race-based expectation of hostility, yet the mere presence of the Black protagonist may have automatically (i.e., unconsciously) activated the Black stereotype, including the hostility trait category that figures so prominently in that stereotype. Thus, the subjects could have sincerely renounced racial prejudice and still unconsciously practiced discrimination against the Black actor. To understand how a knowledge structure such as a stereotype can operate outside a person’s awareness and determine his or her responses to others, it is necessary to understand the distinction between habits
and decisions, a distinction cognitive psychologists characterize in terms of *automatic* versus *controlled* processes. Since this distinction also sheds light on the interplay of stereotypes and personal beliefs in responses to members of stereotyped groups, and ultimately points to strategies for discrimination reduction, we shall discuss it in detail.

A habit is “an action that has been done many times and has become automatic. That is, it is done without conscious thought.”57 In contrast, a decision to take or not to take an action involves conscious thought.58 The distinction between habit and conscious decision is one of the oldest concepts in psychology. In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James described the origins and consequences of habit as follows: “[A]ny sequence of mental action which has been frequently repeated tends to perpetuate itself; so that we find ourselves automatically prompted to think, feel, or do what we have been before accustomed to think, feel, or do, under like circumstances, without any consciously formed purpose, or anticipation of results.”59 James concluded that it is necessary to free limited consciousness from the many mundane requirements of life by removing frequently used or habitual mental sequences from conscious awareness.60

The current model of habits and decisions employed by cognitive psychologists is not appreciably different from that outlined by James over a century ago, except that the current model expresses the distinction in terms of *automatic* versus *controlled* processes.61 According to cognitive psychologists, “Habits are the results of automatic cognitive processes.”62 As Patricia G. Devine points out, “Automatic processes involve the unintentional or spontaneous activation of some well-learned set of associations or responses that have been developed through repeated activation in memory.”63 Controlled
processes, on the other hand, “are intentional and require the active attention of the individual.” Learning to drive a car provides a useful illustration of this distinction. When you first get behind the wheel, virtually every maneuver is a controlled response. Deciding when and how to apply your foot to the pedals as you turn the steering wheel or manually shift gears demands concentration and effort. After enough practice, however, these maneuvers become automatic. You can accelerate, brake, and steer while contemplating health care reform or talking to a traveling companion. The well-learned motor responses occur without conscious effort.

A critical characteristic of habits or automatic processes is that they can operate independently of conscious decisions to break with old patterns of responses and adopt new ones. Thus, attitudes and beliefs can change without a corresponding change in established habits, resulting in a conflict between currently endorsed responses and old habitual responses. Anyone who has ever tried to break a bad habit knows the persistence of habitual responses in the face of decisions to adopt new ones.

Applied to the relationship between stereotypes and personal beliefs, the habit-decision/automatic-controlled processes distinction provides critical theoretical support for understanding the more and less conscious aspects of responses to Blacks (and members of other stereotyped groups). As discussed earlier, the Black stereotype is established in children’s memories before children develop the cognitive ability to critically evaluate and decide on the stereotype’s acceptability. Further, the social environment, including the mass media, incessantly reactivates this stereotype. Thus the stereotype is an ingrained set of associations (i.e., a habit) that involves automatic processes. Non-prejudiced personal beliefs, on the other hand, are necessarily
newer cognitive structures that result from a low-prejudiced person’s conscious decision that stereotype-based responses to Blacks are unacceptable.\textsuperscript{69}

It follows that these decisions to renounce the already-established stereotype do not come to mind (i.e., are not reactivated) nearly as frequently as the social environment automatically activates the stereotype. Because the stereotype has a longer history and greater frequency of activation than the more recently acquired personal beliefs, even people with well-internalized nonprejudiced beliefs are likely to experience a fundamental conflict between the stereotype and their personal beliefs. The discrepancies that most low-prejudiced subjects report between how they believe they should respond and how they actually would respond in contact situations with Blacks (as well as gays) reflect this conflict. That these subjects also report feeling compunction (i.e., guilt and self-criticism) as a result of these discrepancies implies that they regard the stereotype-congruent responses as essentially a bad habit.

This analysis assumes that just as habitual responses (like putting on a seat belt) may be triggered automatically by the presence of relevant environmental cues (like sitting in a car),\textsuperscript{70} stereotype-congruent responses may be triggered automatically by a group membership cue such as a person’s racial identity (or its symbolic equivalent). This means that for a person who rejects the stereotype to avoid stereotype-congruent responses to Blacks (i.e., to avoid falling into a bad habit), she must intentionally inhibit the automatically activated stereotype and activate her newer personal belief structure. As Devine points out, “Such inhibition and initiation of new responses involves controlled processes.”\textsuperscript{71} That is, “nonprejudiced responses take intention, attention, and effort.”\textsuperscript{72}
A particularly illuminating implication of this model is that unless a low-prejudiced person consciously monitors and inhibits the activation of a stereotype in the presence of a member (or symbolic equivalent) of a stereotyped group, she may unintentionally fall into the discrimination habit. For example, the Whites in the previously researched study who interpreted the same ambiguous shove as hostile when the actor was Black and as innocuous when the actor was White could have had well-internalized nonprejudiced beliefs. However, they may not have consciously monitored the automatic activation of the Black stereotype. Because Blacks are stereotypically viewed as hostile, activation of the stereotype would have primed the hostility category, making it more accessible for social judgments about the Black actor. Since the Black stereotype is automatically activated, it could have biased subjects’ judgment of the Black actor unconsciously.

One strength of this model, then, is that it explains how even people with well-internalized nonprejudiced standards are capable of unconscious discrimination against Blacks. One extraordinarily revealing experiment examined how automatic processes affected responses to members of a stereotyped group. The experiment involved presenting stereotype-related information to persons below their perceptual threshold, so that subjects could not consciously process the information. Thus, any effects of such subliminally presented information on subsequent social judgments would necessarily result from automatic processes. The experiment found that the effects of automatic stereotype activation are equally strong and inescapable for high- and low-prejudiced subjects.

In the study, both high- and low-prejudiced subjects performed a task that exposed them to either a low concentration
(20 percent of a hundred-word list) or a high concentration (80 percent of a hundred-word list) of Black stereotype labels (e.g., afro, lazy, musical, athletic, poor, etc.) in a manner determined to be effectively outside their conscious awareness. For example, to prevent subjects from having conscious access to the labels, the labels were presented very rapidly (within a time frame of eighty milliseconds) and were followed immediately by a mask (i.e., a series of jumbled letters). None of these labels, or “primes,” were related to hostility. In an ostensibly unrelated second experiment, subjects read a behavioral description of a person named Donald, whose race was not specified and who was engaging in a series of ambiguously hostile behaviors. For example, Donald demands his money back from a store clerk immediately after a purchase and refuses to pay his rent until his apartment is repainted. Devine found that both high- and low-prejudiced subjects’ ratings of the target’s hostility were significantly higher (i.e., indicated more hostility) when subliminally exposed to a high, rather than a low, concentration of Black-stereotype labels.

These findings demonstrate that well-learned sets of associations like stereotypes can be activated automatically in perceivers’ memories and can affect subsequent social judgments. The effects of automatic stereotype priming on subjects’ evaluation of the target person’s hostility are especially revealing because no hostility-related traits were used as primes. Thus, it seems that the Black stereotype must be constructed cognitively in such a way that activating one component of the stereotype simultaneously primes or activates the remaining closely associated components as well. These findings also suggest that even low-prejudiced subjects who have well-internalized, non-prejudiced beliefs about Blacks have cognitive structures (i.e.,