Whites' Interpersonal Interactions Shape, and Are Shaped by, Implicit Prejudice

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Abstract

Implicit racial prejudice is a prevalent form of racial bias less subject to conscious awareness and control, compared with self-reported bias. Implicit pro-White/anti-Black bias has documented negative implications for the lives of African Americans. Guided by a "shared-reality" approach, research shows how implicit prejudice shapes the lives of White Americans. Two basic principles emerge. First, under the right circumstances, Whites' implicit prejudice decreases to correspond with the apparent egalitarianism of their contacts. Second, although individuals cannot introspect much on it, implicit prejudice predicts Whites' desire to affiliate with fellow Whites. Specifically, greater implicit prejudice predicts liking other Whites who seem uncomfortable interacting with Blacks. This work has ramifications for policies to mitigate prejudice—such as including own-group strategies—as well as societal implications of social networks saturated with individuals who hold similar degrees of implicit prejudice.

Keywords

implicit prejudice, shared reality, social interaction, racism

Tweet

Implicit prejudice makes Whites seek other Whites uncomfortable with Blacks, but meeting an egalitarian White reduces implicit prejudice.

Key Points

- Implicit racial prejudice reflects common but unexamined biases of Whites toward Blacks.
- People prefer to share reality, so they reduce implicit prejudice when expecting an egalitarian conversation partner.
- Otherwise, implicitly prejudiced Whites prefer to interact with other Whites who seem uncomfortable with Blacks.
- "Shared realities" mean that people's social networks may saturate with similarly prejudiced (or unprejudiced) individuals.
- Contact with other Whites shapes Whites' implicit biases.

Introduction

Given the vast diversity of human experience, we interact with others strikingly similar to ourselves. People of similar weight and emotional outlook cluster together within a social network (Christakis & Fowler, 2007, 2009). People of similar ideological stripes tend to live in the same neighborhood (Bishop, 2008; Motyl, Iyer, Oishi, Trawalter, & Nosek, 2014). And friends' attitudes and activity preferences are strikingly similar (Bahns, Pickett, & Crandall, 2012). Two basic principles could account for such homophily: (a) People's attitudes, emotions, and behavior adjust to fit others around them, and (b) people like individuals who feel similar more than those who feel dissimilar.

Do these principles extend to prejudice—even if it is a form of prejudice that we have a limited ability to introspect (i.e., implicit prejudice)? Guided by a "shared-reality" approach, the research described here shows that this is indeed the case. Under the right circumstances, individuals' implicit prejudice reflects the apparent beliefs of their interaction partners, and individuals are drawn to people who appear to have similar intergroup attitudes and experiences as they do. This work has ramifications for policies mitigating and social structures perpetuating prejudice.

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Explicit and Implicit Prejudice

When thinking about prejudice, we often think of biases we can readily identify: A racial epithet, blatant stereotyping of a woman's ability in the workplace, or candid discomfort with the presence of a man in a turban. These consciously controlled, thought-out biases are what social psychologists term *explicit prejudice*. A triumph of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent legislation addressing group-based discrimination has been the steady decline of explicit prejudice (Dovidio, 2001; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997). As norms changed and outspoken prejudice became seen as less acceptable, individuals' personal attitudes about minority groups followed suit. For example, almost 100% of White Americans report that Whites and Blacks should be able to go to the same schools and that they would accept an African American family moving in next door (Bobo, 2001). Yet despite legislative and cultural change regarding the acceptability of prejudice, experiences of prejudice and discrimination still persist (Bobo & Charles, 2009; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). To account for this contradiction, social psychologists argue that intergroup bias has not disappeared; rather, it has metamorphosed into subtler forms of bias, such as implicit prejudice.

Implicit prejudice is one's automatic negative responses to a given social group and its members. Implicit prejudice is prevalent, even among people who espouse staunchly egalitarian viewpoints (Nosek et al., 2007). Hundreds of studies have supported the view that implicit prejudice occurs spontaneously and unintentionally—often even unconsciously—to influence judgments and behavior (for reviews, see Dasgupta, 2004; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009; but see Gawronski, LeBel, & Peters, 2007, for unanswered definitional questions). Although only moderately correlated with explicit prejudice (Nosek & Smyth, 2007), implicit prejudice uniquely predicts an array of outcomes, ranging from the stealthy underpinnings of everyday interactions to profoundly consequential decision-making. For example, implicit prejudice predicts spontaneous responses to outgroup members, including "fight-or-flight" physiological reactions (Mendes, Gray, Mendoza-Denton, Major, & Epel, 2007), quick evaluations (e.g., Gawronski, Ehrenberg, Banse, Zukova, & Klauer, 2003; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003), and minute, nonverbal behaviors that convey friendliness (e.g., Bessenoff & Sherman, 2000; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). Implicit prejudice also relates to decisions such as voting or policy support (Greenwald, Smith, Sriram, Bar-Anan, & Nosek, 2009; Payne et al., 2010), hiring (Rudman & Glick, 2001), medical judgments (Green et al., 2007), and even whom to shoot in a videogame involving potentially armed assailants (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Plant & Peruche, 2005). Together, this vast and growing area of research provides extensive evidence that, although we may have limited access to, or conscious control over, our implicit prejudice, it affects our lives in tangible and meaningful ways, raising issues for interventions designed to improve intergroup relations.

Implicit Prejudice and Interpersonal Interactions

Despite the consequences of implicit prejudice and people's limited conscious awareness of it, implicit prejudice follows the same principles that shape how people choose and adjust with their friends that make social networks homogeneous. A "shared-reality" approach asserts that people satisfy affiliation and certainty needs by achieving a sense of mutual consensus (i.e., shared reality) with their social interaction partners (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009). This basic framework predicts when individuals' attitudes and experiences will adjust to fit the people they encounter: This is one route to making social networks homogeneous. The first prediction is the *affiliative social-tuning hypothesis*. If achieving shared reality with someone yields interpersonal connection, then when a person wants to experience such a connection (i.e., feels affiliative motivation), the person's attitudes, beliefs, and emotions should adjust to match the other person. The second prediction is the *epistemic social-tuning hypothesis*. If achieving shared reality with someone also yields a sense of certainty, then when one wants to experience greater certainty (i.e., feels epistemic motivation), the person should also adjust to fit the other person.

This perspective also fits the established principle that individuals are drawn to similar others (Berscheid, 1985; Byrne, 1971; Newcomb, 1961; Tesser, 1993), the other route to social network homogeneity. Affiliative or epistemic social tuning should serve their intended function; people should feel drawn to others who appear to share their reality. Sharing reality and the underlying needs it fulfills are fundamental human drives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske, 2004; Hardin & Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Pittman, 2008), so shared reality's effects extend beyond conscious attitudes and experiences even to those with limited conscious access, including implicit prejudice.

Whites' Implicit Prejudice Adjusts to Fit Apparent Views of Ingroup Members

According to the affiliative social-tuning prediction, individuals' implicit prejudice should tune toward an interaction partner's when they desire to affiliate. To test this hypothesis, participants interacted with a Black or White experimenter, who either wore a blank t-shirt or appeared to endorse egalitarian ethnic beliefs by wearing a t-shirt with the word "Eracism" printed on it (Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005). The participants completed a measure of

implicit prejudice and reported their liking of the experimenter. As expected, the more that White participants liked the experimenter wearing the anti-racism t-shirt, the lower their own implicit prejudice. But implicit prejudice and liking were not related when the experimenter wore the blank t-shirt.

To assure that differences in affiliative motivation indeed caused implicit prejudice consistent with the experimenter's apparent attitude, a subsequent study independently manipulated affiliative motivation: A White experimenter behaved in a friendly way to encourage a desire to get along (affiliative motivation) or a rude way to dispel any such motivation. As expected, participants who interacted with the friendly, ostensibly egalitarian experimenter expressed lower implicit prejudice toward African Americans than participants who interacted with a friendly experimenter wearing a blank t-shirt. In contrast, the ostensible beliefs of the rude experimenter did not affect participants' implicit prejudice (Sinclair, Lowery, et al., 2005).

According to the epistemic social-tuning hypothesis, the desire to gain information and reduce uncertainty (i.e., epistemic motivation) should change implicit prejudice as a function of the interpersonal context, just as affiliative motivation does. To test this prediction, another study measured epistemic motivation by assessing how quickly participants could access their intergroup attitudes, prior to interacting with their experimenter. To do so, an initial, supposedly unrelated study measured how quickly participants responded to questions about their ethnic attitudes and related beliefs. Responding slowly to intergroup attitude questions indicated that they were less sure about these attitudes, and, therefore, more uncertain and more epistemically motivated (e.g., Holland, Verplanken, & van Knippenberg, 2003). Participants then believed they were participating in a "second" study, during which they interacted with an experimenter whose clothing was neutral or conveyed an egalitarian message (i.e., Eracism).

As expected, the less sure participants were of their ethnic attitudes during the first half of the study, the more their implicit prejudice adjusted to the apparent views of their experimenter who wore the anti-racism t-shirt in the second half. Epistemic motivation and implicit prejudice were unrelated when the experimenter wore a blank t-shirt. Follow-up experiments directly manipulated epistemic motivation by priming participants with the concepts of certainty or uncertainty and found corresponding fit with the experimenter's apparent views: When epistemic motivation was high, participants' implicit prejudice adjusted toward the apparent views of the experimenter, but this was not the case when epistemic motivation was low. Further, this adjustment was unique to interpersonal influence. Participants' implicit prejudice did not adjust to the egalitarian Eracism logo when it was conveyed by a poster that happened to be on the wall instead of on another person's t-shirt, despite the appropriate (epistemic) motivation (Lun, Sinclair, Whitchurch, & Glenn, 2007).

But why do people change their implicit prejudice when socially tuning? Although people have limited control over this kind of prejudice, people who have a personal, internalized motivation to control prejudice do exhibit lower implicit prejudice (Legault, Green-Demers, Grant, & Chung, 2007; Moskowitz, Salomon, & Taylor, 2000; Plant & Devine, 1998), as do those who take part in re-training their negative associations (Devine, Forscher, Austin, & Cox, 2012; Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000; Kawakami, Dovidio, & van Kamp, 2005). However, according to the shared-reality approach, social tuning should change the fundamental degree to which people automatically associate Blacks with negativity. We have initial evidence supporting this prediction (e.g., Lowery et al., 2005), but more research needs to be done to firmly establish that this is the case.

Clearly, implicit prejudice is subject to social tuning within a given social interaction. But developing ways to ameliorate prejudice requires knowing whether these fluctuations extend over time and beyond the immediate situation. One way is through the consistency of people's social interactions over time. This has not been examined with respect to implicit prejudice, but related research on the interpersonal basis of implicit self-esteem provides some support (Weisbuch, Sinclair, Skorinko, & Eccleston, 2009). In this work, women participated in two experimental sessions separated by a week. At their first session, participants of varying weights completed an initial, implicit self-esteem measure. During this session, participants all interacted with an experimenter whose beliefs were again either clearly evident via a message on her t-shirt or with an experimenter wearing a blank t-shirt. The message on the t-shirt was intended to express favorable attitudes toward heavy women, reading "everyBODY is beautiful."

One week later, participants returned to the lab and completed the implicit self-esteem measure a second time. At this session, some participants interacted with the same experimenter from Session 1, but regardless of whether she wore the logo during the first session, all experimenters always wore a blank t-shirt at Session 2. Another subset of participants interacted with a new experimenter at Session 2, who also always wore a blank t-shirt. At the initial session, the experimenter's ostensible attitudes made no difference in implicit self-esteem. However, when participants returned one week later, heavier weight women who had interacted with someone whose attitudes appeared to be favorable toward heavy women endorsed greater implicit self-esteem. This delayed improvement in self-esteem was evident only when participants interacted with the *same* experimenter at the second session, even though the experimenter's views were not evident anymore. Theoretically, if heavyweight participants repeatedly interacted with the seemingly egalitarian experimenter over time, their implicit self-esteem would repeatedly be protected. Thus, the self-esteem context suggests support that implicit attitudes adjust over time via continued interaction with people who have particular views.

Whites Are Drawn to Others Who Appear to Have Similar Ethnic Attitudes and Experiences

Implicit prejudice might also play a part in determining whether one is drawn to individuals who seem to have similar ethnic attitudes and experiences, the second established route to social network homogeneity. Because people with higher implicit prejudice are less likely to interact with outgroup members (Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2003), they should feel less similar to people who have outgroup friends, even when the target person is a racial ingroup member. People might not only befriend people with similar frequencies of outgroup contact, but they also seem to befriend people who have similar *comfort* with outgroup contact. One especially common and direct indication of one's comfort level with outgroup members—and one that consistently correlates with implicit prejudice (see Dasgupta, 2004)—is nonverbal behavior. People may surround themselves with people who have similar numbers of outgroup friends, similar experiences during outgroup contact, and similar levels of implicit prejudice.

Policy Implications

Include Own-Group Strategies, When Attempting to Mitigate Prejudice

Lay and academic approaches to mitigating prejudice often focus on either individual strategies (education) or intergroup contact (group-to-group encounters). While these approaches have benefits, they also have limitations. For example, with respect to individual strategies, social psychology has demonstrated the benefits of repeated re-training of one's negative associations (Dovidio et al., 2000; Kawakami, Dovidio, Moll, Hermsen, & Russin, 2000), internalizing a motivation to control prejudice or be egalitarian (Devine, Plant, Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Vance, 2002; Legault et al., 2007; Plant & Devine, 1998), and taking the perspective of stigmatized outgroup members (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vorauer, Martens, & Sasaki, 2009). However, most individual and self-regulatory techniques to ameliorate implicit prejudice have yielded strategies that demand time and cognitive resources.

Intergroup contact is also a powerful means of reducing prejudice (Hodson & Hewstone, 2012; Pettigrew, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Tropp & Mallett, 2011). However, this strategy for socially regulating prejudice can be difficult to widely implement and can both benefit and burden ethnic minorities who participate in such contact. Ethnic minorities make up only approximately 36% of the Unites States' population, so widespread intergroup contact is not feasible (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Moreover, given persistent ethnic residential, workplace, and school segregation (Rugh & Massey, 2010, 2013), Whites, the dominant group and most frequent targets of prejudice-reduction efforts, most likely do not regularly interact with ethnic minorities, particularly Blacks and Latinos. Even when such interactions do occur, ethnic minorities experience challenges. African Americans, for example, feel less authentic and more cognitively depleted after interacting with a White person (Richeson, Trawalter, & Shelton, 2005). When such interactions go well, they can lead the disadvantaged to underestimate the injustice and discrimination suffered by their group, diminishing their support for action to challenge inequality (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009; Wright & Lubensky, 2009).

Our work suggests a complement to these strategies, encouraging Whites—or the high-status majority group in a given society—to contribute to the mitigation of prejudice by making their support for egalitarian values clear and unmistakable. In both the affiliative and epistemic social-tuning series of experiments, Whites' implicit prejudice changed in response to the apparent beliefs of fellow Whites. As such, White participants did not have to struggle with the challenges of intergroup contact to experience attitude change, and ethnic minorities did not have to bear the burden of providing a counter-stereotypic contact experience or other liabilities associated with intergroup contact for them.

Individuals Could Inhabit Social Networks Differentially Saturated With Implicit Prejudice

Research reviewed elsewhere in this journal as well as in this article illustrates that intergroup interactions can be challenging for both majority and minority group members (Brewer, 1996; Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002; Richeson & Shelton, 2003). Furthermore, Whites' greater implicit prejudice worsens these challenges and makes them avoid social relations with outgroup members altogether (Pettigrew, 1998; Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Taken together, these findings suggest how segregated social networks develop. Imagine, for example, the prototypical cafeteria in which Whites and Blacks sit at separate tables (Tatum, 2003).

However, our work implies something more: Whites might coalesce into ingroup networks composed of individuals with similar implicit outgroup prejudices, adding a layer of attitudinal segregation onto the better-known overt ethnic segregation. In concert, these experiments suggest that although individuals have limited conscious awareness of their implicit prejudice, they may end up inhabiting social networks comprising individuals with corresponding attitudes. This suggests the possibility of a recursive process making ethnic attitudes within a given social milieu increasingly extreme over time—all in ways that are difficult to recognize or regulate.

The possibility of attitudinal segregation also has powerful implications regarding the experiences of ethnic minorities. Members of ethnic minority groups, such as African Americans, are well-aware that they may be subject to

stereotyping and prejudice (e.g., Hunt, 2007; Ogbu, 1997) and have developed strategies to protect their self-esteem and mood when they think this has occurred (e.g., Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). However, members of ethnic or social minorities can end up embedded in an implicitly biased social network due to necessity (e.g., work or school) or due to choice because its majority group members explicitly espouse egalitarian views. If so, they may be less able to recognize as bias the subtle reactions associated with implicit prejudice and therefore be less able to compensate for them. Repeated exposure to reactions that bypass these self-protective strategies—as would be the case in a biased network—could be an objective, contextual basis of the perceived discrimination and lack of felt belonging that detract from ethnic minority health (Jackson et al., 1995; Penner & Hagiwara, 2014; Williams & Mohammed, 2013) and academic performance (Shook & Clay, 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007, 2011).

Conclusion

Overall, our research demonstrates the importance of own-group interactions in both perpetuating and mitigating prejudices that individuals might not even be aware they hold. In so doing, our work builds on existing strategies for reducing prejudice and improving intergroup outcomes, but importantly, it points to efficient, minimally effortful means of reducing implicit intergroup biases via basic social motivations in ways that could yield durable and broad-reaching effects.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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