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Does the Implicit Bias Test Predict Discriminatory Behavior?

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What is implicit bias?

In recent years the concept of implicit bias has received a great deal of attention in the United States. Implicit bias is an idea that suggests that regardless of our conscious thoughts and feelings, we each hold biased judgements in our subconscious against people that are different than us. For example, it has been argued that Caucasian people who make a concerted effort to avoid discriminating against African-Americans still hold untrue racist stereotypes and opinions about African-Americans in their subconscious mind which cause them to unintentionally act in a discriminatory way toward African-Americans. The implicit bias concept was further expanded in 1998 with the development of psychological tests that have claimed to reveal one's hidden racial and ethnic implicit biases (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

Since then, implicit bias has received a great deal of media attention and has found its way into public policy. The U.S. Department of Justice has embraced the concept and has argued that it is a major contributing factor for explaining the disproportionate involvement of African-Americans and Hispanics as clients within the criminal justice system. This argument suggests that police officers, jailers, prosecutors, victim advocates, judges, corrections officers, treatment counselors, and probation and parole agents all have subconscious biases that cause them to unconsciously profile and discriminate against African-American and Hispanic defendants (Fridell, 2016). Numerous trainers have now sprung up to offer implicit bias training to criminal justice professionals, where trainees are taught to expose and address their hidden, subconscious biases. Even the final report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, under Pillar 5, recommends the expansion of implicit bias training for law enforcement personnel (President's Task Force, 2015).

What does the evidence suggest?

In the midst of all of this attention, however, what is the evidence regarding implicit bias and its influence on actual discriminatory behavior? Since 1998, many studies have tried to test the relationship between a person's implicit bias test score and the person's actual discriminatory behavior. Most of these studies used undergraduate student test subjects who took the implicit bias test and then were asked to engage in some type of activity that afforded them the opportunity to discriminate against members of another group. For example, in some studies they were shown a multiracial series of photos of individuals and asked to identify someone they would hire for a job, date, expect to do well in math, or find guilty in a criminal case. Other studies measured nonverbal behaviors and physiological responses (respirations, heart rate, and sweating) when interacting with people of a different group or race. Still others asked the research subjects their opinions about various affirmative action or anti-discrimination policies. A few even asked university students to act as police officers and shoot at a video of a suspect holding a gun to determine if the students

fired more quickly (or when they should not have fired at all) when the picture displayed an African-American criminal suspect.

As of 2008, 122 studies had been conducted across several nations, involving 14,900 persons, and measuring bias between different racial and ethnic groups, both sexes, straight and gay persons, religions, and other types of groups holding biases against one another (such as rich versus poor or Christian versus Muslim). Each study produced somewhat different results. Professor Anthony Greenwald, the person who initially developed the implicit bias tests, headed a team that examined these 122 studies and concluded that there was a strong link between a person's implicit bias score and the person's discriminatory behavior (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). It could be argued, however, that Dr. Greenwald had a conflict of interest in conducting this study as he was the creator of the implicit bias test and has profited from the test both financially and in career advancements.

Another review was conducted in 2013, this time by a neutral, independent team of five researchers from five major universities across the U.S. (Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard, & Tetlock, 2013). These researchers only examined studies which looked at racial and ethnic bias, excluding studies that examined gender bias, sexual-orientation bias, or other biases. This left only 46 studies which involved about 5,600 persons tested. This team also noted that Greenwald intentionally refused to consider the influence of any overt biases the research participants expressed. In other words, some of the studies measured implicit bias and overt (explicit) bias, which would be racist attitudes the person openly admits to holding.

When this independent and impartial team reviewed these studies they found that, after controlling for one's overt racist views, implicit bias test scores had little or no influence on actual racial discriminatory behavior. They found that in the majority of the 46 studies examined, a person's implicit bias score had no influence on their perceptions of persons of another race / ethnicity, their nonverbal behaviors toward the other race / ethnicity, their choices regarding someone of another race / ethnicity, or their physiological responses when encountering someone of another race / ethnicity. They even found that in the police shooting scenario study, implicit bias did not matter after controlling for one's overt racial attitudes. In other words, discriminatory actions generally were detected when the people in the studies openly admitted racial stereotypes or biases, but implicit bias scores rarely had any significant influence.

As the concept of implicit bias has already been so widely embraced, this study was quickly attacked, especially by Professor Greenwald, the creator of the implicit bias tests, and his colleagues (Greenwald, Banaji, & Nosek, 2015). Nevertheless, additional studies since then have continued to question the validity of implicit bias tests in predicting racial or ethnic discriminatory behavior (Blanton & Jaccard, 2015; Blanton, Jaccard, & Burrows, 2015; Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard, & Tetlock, 2015). Unfortunately these facts were lost on the members of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

Conclusions

There are two important law enforcement points to take away from these findings. First, overt stereotypes and racist views do influence people's behavior. The research findings here strongly suggest that if an officer consciously holds negative views and stereotypes toward African-Americans or Hispanics, his or her behaviors will be influenced by these prejudiced attitudes in a negative way. However, the findings also strongly suggest that persons who do not hold overt racist attitudes do not have to worry about some deeply-hidden, unknown, unconscious racist attitudes influencing their work decisions. These findings reveal the need to aggressively weed out officers who hold conscious racial stereotypes and biases in order to avoid biased-based policing. These findings also raise questions about whether the money and time spent on law enforcement training and testing regarding implicit bias could be put to better use on something else.

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