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SundayReview

The Roots of Implicit Bias

Gray Matter

By DANIEL A. YUDKIN and JAY VAN BAVEL DEC. 9, 2016

During the first presidential debate, Hillary Clinton argued that “implicit bias is a problem for everyone, not just police.” Her comment moved to the forefront of public conversation an issue that scientists have been studying for decades: namely, that even well-meaning people frequently harbor hidden prejudices against members of other racial groups. Studies have shown that these subtle biases are widespread and associated with discrimination in legal, economic and organizational settings.

Critics of this notion, however, protest what they see as a character smear — a suggestion that everybody, deep down, is racist. Vice President-elect Mike Pence has said that an “accusation of implicit bias” in cases where a white police officer shoots a black civilian serves to “demean law enforcement.” Writing in *National Review*,

David French claimed that the concept of implicit bias lets people “indict entire communities as bigoted.”

But implicit bias is not about bigotry per se. As new research from our laboratory suggests, implicit bias is grounded in a basic human tendency to divide the social world into groups. In other words, what may appear as an example of tacit racism may actually be a manifestation of a broader propensity to think in terms of “us versus them” — a prejudice that can apply, say, to fans of a different sports team. This doesn’t make the effects of implicit bias any less worrisome, but it does mean people should be less defensive about it.

Furthermore, our research gives cause for optimism: Implicit bias can be overcome with rational deliberation.

In a series of experiments whose results were published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, we set out to determine how severely people would punish someone for stealing. Our interest was in whether a perpetrator’s membership in a particular group would influence the severity of the punishment he or she received.

We recruited several hundred volunteers to play an online game that involved giving and receiving small sums of money, and created a situation in which people witnessed one player stealing another player’s money. We then presented volunteers with the opportunity to punish the perpetrator by confiscating some or all of the perpetrator’s money and removing it from the game.

The experiments were manipulated so that the perpetrator appeared to be a member of either the same group as the punisher or a different one. In one experiment, for instance, we led football fans to believe the perpetrator was either a supporter of the same team as they were or a supporter of a rival team. In another, we told them the perpetrator was a citizen of their own country or of a different one.

When people made their decisions swiftly — in a few seconds or less — they were biased in their punishment decisions. Not only did they punish out-group members more harshly, they also treated members of their own group more leniently. The same pattern of bias emerged in a pair of follow-up experiments in

which we distracted half of the punishers. (We increased their “cognitive load” by asking them to retain a string of seven letters and numbers in their memory.)

But we also found that people could overcome these biased instincts if they engaged in rational deliberation. When people had the chance to reflect on their decision, they were largely unbiased, handing out equal punishments to in-group and out-group members.

This finding — that people are reflexively prone to “intergroup bias” in punishment — is consistent with what many scientists believe about humans’ evolutionary heritage. *Homo sapiens* spent thousands of years in close-knit communities competing for scarce resources on the African savanna. Members of the in-group were presumably sources of help, comfort and cooperation; members of opposing groups, by contrast, were sources of threat and violence. As a result, the tendency to instinctively treat in-group members with care and foreigners with caution may be etched into our DNA.

Our finding sheds some light on the nature of implicit racial bias. Because people frequently form group memberships on the basis of race, the same biases that emerge along group lines may underlie many instances of racial discrimination. This human tendency is almost certainly inflamed when different racial groups are exposed to racial stereotyping and institutional discrimination, but it may start with common instincts driven by the pressures of evolution.

We need not resign ourselves to a future of tribalism. On the contrary, our research suggests that people have the capacity to override their worst instincts — if they are able to reflect on their decision making as opposed to acting on their first impulse. These insights, for example, could inform the types of implicit bias training programs that the Department of Justice is now requiring for nearly 30,000 prosecutors and law enforcement officers.

Acknowledging the truth about ourselves — that we see and think about the world through the lens of group affiliations — is the first step to making things better.

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