

Implicit Discrimination

By Marianne Bertrand, Dolly Chugh, and Sendhil Mullainathan
New Approaches to Discrimination (2005)

James J. Heckman



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I. Psychology of Implicit Attitudes

- Most modern social psychologists believe that attitudes occur in both implicit and explicit modes, suggesting that people can think, feel, and behave in ways that oppose their explicitly expressed views, and even, explicitly known self-interests.
- The preferences and beliefs that economists typically describe as an individual's "attitudes" are what psychologists would specify as "explicit attitudes," which may or may not align with the same individual's "implicit attitudes," defined as unconscious mental associations between a target (such as an African-American) and a given attribute.
- One of the most important recent research insights is that implicit attitudes can be measured.
- A widely used measure of implicit mental processes is the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Anthony G. Greenwald et al., 1998).

- The race IAT is typically taken on a computer.
- The test-taker must quickly categorize words and pictures of faces that appear in the center of the screen.
- Faces are to be categorized as African-American or white and words (such as happiness or tragedy) as good or bad. Pairs of categories appear on either side of the screen.
- If the stimulus belongs to categories on the right (left), the test-taker hits a key on the right (left) side of the keyboard.
- Each test-taker completes two versions of the task, categorizing as many as 60 different stimuli.
- In one, the “compatible” version, the two categories on one side are paired according to a stereotype, such as “African-American” with “bad” in one corner, and “White” with “good” in the other corner. In the “incompatible” version, the categories are paired counterstereotypically, such as “African-American” with “good,” and “white” with “bad.”

- These findings suggest that controllability may be an important behavioral dimension.
- But could any relevant economic behavior, such as a hiring decision, truly be characterized as “hard-to-control”?
- In fact, social psychologists argue that even theoretically controllable behaviors may operate with greater automaticity under certain situational conditions.
- Chugh (2004) described the “messy, pressured, and distracting” conditions of managerial work as conducive to implicit mental processes.
- Time pressure and stress are two situational influences likely to first generate an acceleration of the mental process, and then an attempt to reduce the amount of information needing processing.
- This type of “cognitive load,” also occurs in the form of conflicting yet simultaneous task demands and excessive attentional demands.

II. Can Implicit Attitudes Be “Manipulated”?

- One intriguing feature of implicit attitudes is their potential manipulability. In one study, white participants were told they would be working with a black individual, who would either be their subordinate or their superior.
- Those anticipating a black superior showed more positive implicit attitudes toward blacks than those anticipating a black subordinate, suggesting that positive and powerful black exemplars are important cues.
- In another, exposure to photographs of admired African-Americans (e.g., Bill Cosby) led to a decrease in anti-black implicit attitudes, an effect that persisted for 24 hours.
- In another, reducing attention to race cues (e.g., by increasing attention required by the task) moderated implicit attitudes.
- This work certainly does not imply that implicit attitudes can be reversed with simple manipulations of the situation or task. However, the work suggests malleability in implicit attitudes and associated behaviors.

III. Interpreting Existing Audit Studies in the Light of Implicit Discrimination

- Obviously, implicit attitudes cannot explain all forms of racial discrimination. Explicit discrimination in employment ads prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had little to do with implicit attitudes.
- However, we find it reasonable to hypothesize that several other documented forms of differential treatments may, in part, reflect such implicit attitudes.
- The Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) resume task, for example, theoretically satisfies several criteria thought to be important for implicit discrimination to arise.
- First, the task is typically performed under important time pressure, as the screeners have to make their way through a thick pile of resumes, often juggling this task with multiple other administrative loads.
- The task is also involves considerable ambiguity: in the search for a “good” job applicant, there is no such thing as a simple formula to be followed to determine which candidates are above the “fit line.”

- Several other field experiments may fit the implicit discrimination model.
- Consider Ian Ayres et al.'s (2004) finding of African-American cab drivers receiving lower tips than white cab drivers.
- A tipping decision is often made quickly, just as the passenger is stepping out of the cab, and when the passenger's mind is preoccupied with an upcoming destination or event.
- Finally, ambiguity exists in how to interpret subtle cues about friendliness and honesty.
- Bargaining is another relevant context, as in John List's (2004) study of discrimination in the sports-card market.
- When a prospective buyer expresses interest in a card, the seller makes a quick first offer. Very often, this first offer is made as the seller's attention is split between the current buyer and other prospective buyers nearby.

IV. Testing for Implicit Discrimination

- Hence, implicit discrimination could potentially explain some economic phenomena, with sufficient testing.
- We suggest several potential directions for future research.
- A first approach would be to perform more correlation exercises in the field between economic behavior and IAT.
- One could contact the realtors after a fair-housing audit took place and ask them to take an IAT, or contact sports-card traders studied by List (2004).
- Alternatively, with some creativity, one might integrate a field element within a lab study.
- For example, if taxicabs pick up subjects to bring to the lab for an IAT, one could correlate subjects' IAT scores with their tipping behavior.

- Second, one could perform additional tests by empirically varying situational factors shown to be important for implicit attitudes to affect behavior.
- For example, one could schedule an appointment with a realtor either when s/he is quite busy or less busy.
- Or one could vary the level of ambiguity of the realtor's task with a more-specific or less-specific description of the client's desired home.
- One could also reduce attention to the social cues in the context of the resume study by modifying the location of the names on resumes.
- Bertrand and Mullainathan (with Abhijit Banerjee) are currently carrying out such a manipulation in India in the context of caste-based discrimination.
- In India, it is possible for a given individual to have a caste-neutral name but for his or her father to have a lower-caste name.

- Another testing possibility is to attempt to mimic natural situations in the laboratory itself.
- We have started exploring this possibility in the context of the resume study.
- Specifically, we recruited 115 subjects for a study on information-processing and attention.
- The task was to screen 50 resumes for a company filling an administrative assistant position (job description provided).
- Their task was to select the 15 best candidates.
- Each participant received a unique set of resumes in that, following Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004), each resume was randomly assigned either a white-sounding or African-American sounding first name.

- While our pilot testing findings are preliminary, some encouraging results have emerged.
- First, participants who reported feeling rushed picked a significantly lower fraction of resumes with African-American names.
- We also found a negative correlation between the number of African-American resumes selected by a given subject and that subject's implicit attitude about intelligence in blacks and whites (where negative scores indicate an association between African-American and dumb).
- Most interestingly, this negative correlation was concentrated among those subjects who ex post reported feeling most rushed during the task.
- In contrast, we found no apparent correlation between the number of African-American resumes picked and the self-reported explicit attitudes towards African-Americans.

- Also, once the design is perfected, we could test de-biasing remedies that emerge naturally from the psychological evidence.
- First, and most obvious, one might simply inform human resource managers about the existence of the implicit bias.
- Second, small changes in the situational context of resume screening could have potential large positive effects.
- Simply leaving more time to the screeners to assess the merit of each resume may limit the role for unconscious responses while performing this task.
- Also, having an African-American person in the interview room, or even in mind, may operate as a positive exemplar (not a monitor) which could mute the importance of unconscious reactions.
- Also, a more structured review process that draws attention to the task cues rather than social cues (such as highlighting the positive and negative aspects of each resume, or evaluation along highly specific job criteria, rather than a general “fit” comparison to a broad job description).

V. Conclusion

- However we test for it, implicit discrimination is not useful simply as a subtle alternative interpretation.
- If it is a powerful driver of discriminatory behavior, it should reshape the way we understand discrimination and alter our available spectrum of remedies.
- A key differential feature of potential remedies to implicit discrimination is that they could limit the amount of discrimination without forcing agents to take decisions against their will.
- In fact, because people may be engaging in injurious behavior without realizing it, the remedies may bring their decisions closer in line with what they (explicitly) think or favor for their organization.
- Another important feature of these remedies is that, unlike most affirmative-action policies, they can be implemented at low cost and without making race salient, greatly increasing political feasibility.