An Introduction to Implicit Bias

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Diversity Brownbag
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Attitudes in General

People plainly have **attitudes** towards things.

You may like the movie *Star Wars*, or not.
Attitudes in General

Some attitudes are biases.

A bias is a (dis)favoring of X’s simply by virtue of their being X’s.
Implicit Bias

Many now worry that people often harbor so-called ‘implicit biases’.

These are often thought to involve racial, ethnic, gendered, or other kinds of social bias.
Implicit Bias

What’s striking about these attitudes is that people seem to be **unaware** of them.

That is, they seem to be **unconscious** or **implicit**.
There are two main ways to experimentally measure attitudes.

An explicit measure involves eliciting (verbal) reports about an attitude.
Ways to Measure Attitudes

An implicit measure using nonverbal cues to assess attitudes.

The most common implicit measure of social bias is the implicit-association test ("IAT").

(e.g., Greenwald et al 1998)
Ways to Measure Attitudes

To demonstrate implicit bias, we often look for **dissociations** between explicit and implicit measures.

There is much striking evidence, including, e.g., weapon and resume priming.

(e.g., Hofmann et al 2005)
Ways to Measure Attitudes

You may wish to take an IAT yourself:

https://implicit.harvard.edu/
Why is this troubling?
Worries about Implicit Bias

A serious concern is that such implicit biases could predict and explain much biased behavior.

Evidence suggests, e.g., that implicit biases correlate with support for racist political positions.

(e.g., Perez 2010)
Worries about Implicit Bias

Indeed, implicit bias seem to effect many spheres of life, including:

- Education
- Healthcare
- Justice
- Employment
- Finance
- Dating

(see, e.g., Qian et al. 2017)
## Worries about Implicit Bias

The bad effects of such biased behaviors may compound over time.

Suppose five equally meritorious employees are given different rates of annual raises due to implicit bias:

### Table 2.2 Yearly salaries for victims and beneficiaries of implicit bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Annual raise&lt;sup&gt;13&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Y0</th>
<th>Y1</th>
<th>Y2</th>
<th>Y5</th>
<th>Y10</th>
<th>Y20</th>
<th>Y30</th>
<th>Y40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$50,500</td>
<td>$51,005</td>
<td>$52,551</td>
<td>$55,231</td>
<td>$61,010</td>
<td>$67,342</td>
<td>$74,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$51,000</td>
<td>$52,020</td>
<td>$55,204</td>
<td>$60,950</td>
<td>$74,297</td>
<td>$90,568</td>
<td>$110,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$51,500</td>
<td>$53,045</td>
<td>$57,964</td>
<td>$67,196</td>
<td>$90,306</td>
<td>$121,363</td>
<td>$163,102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$52,000</td>
<td>$54,080</td>
<td>$60,833</td>
<td>$74,012</td>
<td>$109,556</td>
<td>$162,170</td>
<td>$240,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5%</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
<td>$52,500</td>
<td>$55,125</td>
<td>$63,814</td>
<td>$81,447</td>
<td>$132,665</td>
<td>$216,097</td>
<td>$352,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Alfano 2018, pp. 61ff)
What, if anything, can be done?
Modulating Implicit Bias

One problem is that implicit biases are easily inculcated.

Simply telling participants negative things about a fictitious group generates implicit bias.

(Gregg et al 2006)
Modulating Implicit Bias

By contrast, implicit biases seem quite resistant to explicit reasoning.

Calling people’s attention to their irrational biases does little to change them; even renouncing them is ineffective.

(Gregg et al 2006)
Modulating Implicit Bias

But, while mere exposure is a questionable remedy, exposure plus some kind of training intervention seems to lessen implicit bias.

(e.g., Qian et al 2017)
Modulating Implicit Bias

The hope that we can limit implicit bias has led many organizations to require **training** in implicit bias and how to counter it.

**Harvard mandates 'implicit-bias training' for faculty hiring**

- Harvard University’s School of Public Health now requires faculty search committees to undergo “implicit-bias training” to learn “how unconscious bias can infect the recruitment process.”

(e.g., Goldhill 2017)
Modulating Implicit Bias

“I think implicit bias is a problem for everyone, not just police. I think, unfortunately, too many of us in our great country jump to conclusions about each other. And therefore, I think we need all of us to be asking hard questions about, you know, why am I feeling this way?”

Hillary Clinton
First Presidential Debate of 2016
But...
Is Implicit Bias Real?

Though the existence of implicit bias is both intuitive and seemingly explanatory, it is controversial.

(UN)CONSCIOUS IMPACT

The world is relying on a flawed psychological test to fight racism

By Olivia Goldhill • December 3, 2017

There seem to be two broad criticisms of IAT-type experimental research.
Is Implicit Bias Real?

First, there is a question whether or not these attitudes are really biasing.

While IAT results are correlated with minor behaviors such as gaze times, recent meta-analyses suggest they do not predict much biased behavior.

(e.g., Oswald et al 2013)
Is Implicit Bias Real?

Second, there is a question whether or not these attitudes are really implicit.

There is evidence, e.g., that people are quite adept at predicting the results of their IATs, suggesting they are aware of their biases.

(e.g., Hahn et al 2014)
Is Implicit Bias Real?

But even if we can be aware of our biases occasionally, this does not show that they are not implicit.

Likewise, implicit biases may be weak, but nonetheless real.

(Berger forthcoming)
Is Implicit Bias Real?

In any case, many *methodological issues* remain.

Statistical analyses used to analyze implicit bias are quite limited, and it is not clear if findings demonstrating implicit bias hold when analyzed with more sophisticated methods.
Some Outstanding Questions
What Kind of Attitude?

We can ask: What kind of attitudes are implicit biases? Full-blown beliefs or mere conceptual associations? Or something else?

Beliefs seem deliberate in some sense, whereas mere associations are more reflexive.

(see, e.g., Berger forthcoming)
Are We Responsible?

If such biases are mere (conditioned) associations, then it is hard to see how we can be responsible for actions caused by them.

Alternatively, if they are beliefs, then perhaps people are rightly characterized as biased.

(see, e.g., Levy 2016)
Conclusions

There are countless other interesting issues, which we cannot review here.

But we’ll leave you with one last question: **Might implicit bias lead to more (seemingly more problematic) explicit bias?**
Thanks for your time!

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