

Unconscious Racial Bias

For almost 60 years, social psychologists have documented that many people hold the stereotype that African Americans are criminal and violent. Time and again, this association has proven to be unconscious and not subject to intentional control. Race has been shown to be an overriding influence in computerized experiments involving people's evaluation of ambiguously aggressive behavior, people's decisions to categorize non-weapons as weapons, the speed at which people decide to shoot someone holding a weapon, and the probability that they will shoot at all. In each of these experiments, participants' decisions varied depending on the race of the person they were viewing. Social psychologists refer to this phenomenon as unconscious racial bias.



The existence of unconscious racial bias makes it particularly difficult to determine whether race is a factor in decision-making in any context. In our contemporary environment, individuals are increasingly unlikely to admit or be consciously aware of racial attitudes, yet well-established, peer-reviewed research shows that people of all races continue to harbor negative unconscious biases against African Americans.

Early psychological studies of discrimination traditionally focused on explicit prejudice as expressed in participants' conscious statements and beliefs. Psychologists developed a number of different questionnaire-style tests to measure explicit racial bias, and many such tests are still in use in contemporary research. However, as researchers came to recognize the changing landscape of race in America—a landscape in which even people who hold conscious racist beliefs recognize the social stigma associated with explicitly advocating those beliefs—they began to focus their efforts on examining implicit forms of discrimination.

In the past, implicit or unconscious bias was relegated to the field of psychoanalytic speculation. However, new research tools have enabled psychologists to identify evidence of unconscious associations with increasing precision. Using computers, researchers are able to expose participants to stimuli, such as pictures, words, or sounds, for mere fractions of a second. This exposure, called "priming," is long enough to have a measurable impact on participants' cognition, but not long enough to trigger conscious awareness. Researchers are then able to measure participants' reaction time when completing various tasks and determine whether that reaction time differs depending on whether the participants were primed with African American, white, or race-neutral stimuli.

In another common experiment, called the Implicit Association Test (IAT), participants sit at a computer and are asked to sort words or images into categories by pressing keys assigned to each category. During an IAT, implicit bias is detected by measuring the speed with which participants are able to categorize violent items, for example, when they are paired with African American items. These results are then compared with participants' reaction time when asked to categorize violent items that are paired with white or race-neutral items. In this type of study, implicit bias is present if participants categorize the violent items more quickly when they are paired with African American items than when they are paired with white or race-neutral items.

Implicit bias studies are powerful because they measure prejudice that exists beyond conscious awareness. They often detect bias in people who sincerely believe that they are colorblind or race-neutral. They detect unconscious bias in African American as well as white individuals. These

studies are also consistent across a variety of geographic areas. As a whole, research into unconscious bias shows that, despite the important progress that has been made over the years, race continues to be a factor in the judgments we make.

1) The primary purpose of the passage is to

- A. criticize those who are unconsciously biased against African Americans
- B. inform readers about the existence of unconscious racial bias
- C. explain the differences between implicit bias studies and explicit bias studies
- D. discuss a series of controversial social experiments that revealed the presence of unconscious racial bias in contemporary society
- E. highlight the disparity between early psychological studies and contemporary tests, such as the IAT

2) In paragraph 1, the author writes: "For almost 60 years, social psychologists have documented that many people hold the stereotype that African Americans are criminal and violent. Time and again, this association has proven to be unconscious and not subject to intentional control." Based on these sentences, it can be inferred that

- A. 60 years ago, psychologists did not understand the importance of studies measuring racial bias
- B. 60 years ago, the stereotype that African Americans are violent criminals was much more prevalent than it is today
- C. although racist people often believe African Americans are violent, people no longer admit to holding such beliefs
- D. racist stereotypes can only be controlled through intentional struggles with our subconscious mind
- E. racist stereotypes have embedded themselves deep within our subconscious mind

3) According to the passage, the existence of unconscious racial bias makes it difficult to determine whether race has been a factor in decision-making because

- A. racist people are unlikely to participate in studies where they will have to discuss their beliefs about race
- B. the majority of people who participate in psychological studies are white
- C. in today's society, people are unlikely to admit or even be aware of their own racial bias
- D. typically, race is not the most significant factor in decision-making
- E. most examples of racial bias in contemporary society are explicit, not implicit

4) As used in paragraph 3, which is the best synonym for **advocating**?

- A. intensifying
- B. endorsing
- C. scorning

- D. provoking
- E. transferring

5) According to the passage, the experiment that involves “priming” measures the

- A. difference in a participant’s reaction times when the participant is first shown African American, white, or race-neutral images
- B. difference between African American, white, or race-neutral stimuli
- C. difference between explicit and implicit bias in participants
- D. correlation between violent items and race-biased items
- E. number of times a participant chooses a race-neutral stimulus over an African American or white stimulus

6) Based on information in the passage, which of the following events is most likely to happen during an IAT experiment?

- A. A participant is shown an image of a race-neutral item, such as a leaf, and is asked to compare it to a race-linked item.
- B. A participant is shown an image of a white face, an African American face, and a race-neutral item, and is asked to describe his or her reaction to all three.
- C. A participant is shown a violent object and is asked to link this object with either an African American or a white face.
- D. Experimenters measure the time it takes a participant to categorize a knife as a violent object when it is paired with an African American face as opposed to a white face.
- E. Experimenters measure the number of participants who demonstrate a conscious preference for white-linked images rather than images associated with African Americans.

7) Based on information in the final paragraph, it can be inferred that the author apparently believes that

- A. society will never evolve into a post-racist state
- B. implicit bias studies are the most useful tool we have in the fight against racism
- C. although fewer people admit to being racist, more people than ever show signs of harboring unconscious racist stereotypes
- D. although society has made great strides to overcome racism, there is much work yet to be done
- E. subconscious racism is mostly limited to certain geographic areas

8) Do you believe that unconscious racial bias can ever be overcome? Why or why not?
