Social Norms, Social Experience, & the Indeterminate Content of Implicit Racial Bias
Alex Madva (alexmadva@gmail.com)   Washington University, St. Louis, 11/11/17

(URL = goo.gl/rfaeDS)

1. Overt prejudice on the outs... "a clear majority of Americans were telling pollsters in the early 1980s... that they opposed race discrimination in nearly all its forms... there is no reason to believe that most of them were lying..." (Michelle Alexander 2010, 203)
- Psychologists knew prejudice did not just vanish. A new search began...
- ... for indirect measures of social attitudes → measures that don't depend on self-report
- Most popular: Implicit Association Test (IAT)

2. What is the IAT really measuring?
- Are we measuring "mere associations"? You associate "insect" and "bad" just like…
  when you think of "salt," you think of "pepper" (doctor-nurse, apple-orange)?
- Or full-blown beliefs, emotions, or values? If so, which beliefs? "Blacks are often violent…"
  or "…stereotyped as violent…" or "…victims of violence…"???

Specific Thesis for this Talk: it's messy and vague! → **Indeterminacy**
- Neither mere associations nor fully articulated, propositionally structured beliefs or emotions
- Contents are fundamentally indeterminate (vague, ambiguous, coarse-grained, open-textured)
- E.g., when a white person experiences negative gut feelings during interracial interactions…
  is that fear of the racial other? Is it just anxiety about appearing racist?
- It depends! No general (determinate) answer.
- However, our biases become determinate in context: depending on our other attitudes, traits, goals, social norms and power relations (kinda like Putnam-Burge-style externalism?)
- Cf. Schwitzgebel: not "in-between-believing that *P*"; but "believing that *in-between-P*"
- "implicit affect toward outgroups serves as an ambiguous signal that is available to be conceptualized as different discrete emotions based on the context" (Lee et al. 2017)
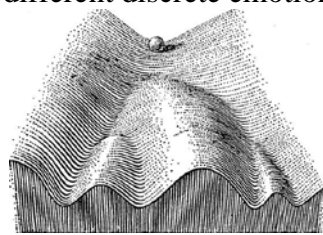
Waddington (1942), "epigenetic landscape"

(Probably too Ambitious) Broader Aims: Case Study in Bridging Diverse Approaches
- Individualistic vs. structural: understanding individuals' racial attitudes by situating those individuals in broader social contexts and relations; understanding racially oppressive social structures—and envisioning emancipatory alternatives!—by populating those structures with embodied minds.
- Phenomenological tradition vs. social psychology: psychologists (& Dennett, Carruthers, etc.) often dismiss the epistemic value of studying experience "from the inside."
  Irony: contemporary science of bias vindicates what phenomenologists have long argued.
  (So why should phenomenologists of race/gender/sociality care about social psychology?
  Maybe the empirical evidence can break phenomenological stalemates?)

3. The Indeterminacy of Experience

Merleau-Ponty: all experience, including perception, is shot through with ambiguity and indeterminacy. "We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon… the presence in the perceived of a positive indeterminacy" (1945/2013, 7, 12).

- What kind of "indeterminacy" is he talking about and why is it "positive?"
- Ordinarily, when a sighted person comes across blurry-looking objects (street signs, scribblings on blackboard), their experience has an affective and action-guiding character.
- Identifying that (vague) blur is a problem to solve: "a sensible that is about to be sensed poses to my body a sort of confused problem. I must find the attitude that will provide it with the means to become determinate... I must find the response to a properly formulated question…" (222/259)
- Compare: difficulty in identifying song lyrics (in, e.g., Aretha Franklin's "Respect")
- Why is it *positive* indeterminacy? Experiences of indeterminacy motivate us to act and resolve them (to make or discover the determinate properties); resolving these indeterminacies requires us to draw on a range of perceptual, bodily, and cognitive skills
- Not a passive process, but a cognitive-affective-behavioral accomplishment
- Often a social accomplishment, too: skills learned from others; collaborate to disambiguate
- Indeterminate "Horizon" of Interpretation: range of possible disambiguations, some more likely (central), some less likely, some off the table entirely. Compare: "Lady Madonna"
- When resolving indeterminacies, we rely on contextual cues (e.g., all perceptual illusions!)

4. Research on implicit bias

Perception, embodiment, and contextual cues
(e.g. Freeman et al. 2011; Hugenberg and Bodenhausen 2003, 2004)

- Implicit racial bias + status cues → judge whether ambiguous face is black or white
- Implicit racial bias + racial perception → judge whether face is angry or happy
- Implicit biases are part of our background set of "skills" for resolving indeterminacies.
- My view: but implicit biases are also themselves indeterminate, and holistically influenced: racial perception ⇔ emotion recognition ⇔ implicit bias ⇔ racial perception, etc.

Is the IAT always measuring **bias**? (Uhlmann et al. 2006; Andreychik and Gill 2012)
Critics suggest that "negative" IAT scores do not always indicate genuinely negative attitudes.

- Does IAT sometimes reflect "knowledge" of oppression or "sympathy" for the mistreated?
- Associations 101: if people associate "black" with "oppressed," and "oppressed" with "bad," then they'll associate "black" with "bad." "Black-oppressed-bad" correlations: no surprise
- Implicit reasoning? "If group X is culturally valued (or possesses a great deal of symbolic and/or material resources), it is good." (Jost et al. 2009)

Cognitive Consistency & Self-Interpreting Bias (Gawronski et al. 2008, 2012)

- Implicit biases are "immediate affective reactions": "gut feelings" of like or dislike
- People often fail to report their negative gut feelings when the implications of those feelings conflict with their other beliefs, goals, and values.
- Old-fashioned racism: blacks are disadvantaged, but they should be disadvantaged because they're inferior, so no hesitation in reporting negative gut feeling: "I dislike blacks."
- Modern racism: disliking disadvantaged groups is wrong, but blacks are not disadvantaged, so it's OK to dislike them, blame their hardships on their "culture" and "choices," etc.
- Aversive racism: a) if you're motivated to fight against prejudice and injustice, and b) if you believe that blacks suffer prejudice and injustice… but c) you still have negative "gut feelings" toward blacks, you will probably reject those gut feelings as wrong, immoral, or inaccurate and instead report: "I like blacks just as much as whites!"

Implications: prejudice reduction must be multifaceted
a. <u>Challenge false beliefs</u> by citing social evidence about ongoing discrimination (external vs. internal explanations for inequalities); listen to and amplify voices of the oppressed
b. <u>Ethical appeal</u> to fairness, ignite goals to resist prejudice, change (perceptions of) <u>norms</u>
c. <u>Debias gut reactions</u>: cultivate better habits of thinking, feeling, and acting (Madva 2017).

<u>Expanding the Metacognitive Map</u> (Cooley et al. 2014, 2015)
Ownership manipulation: "You may have had a 'gut feeling' towards the pictures of heterosexuals and homosexuals. Research has found that <u>this gut feeling usually reflects [does NOT reflect] people's genuine attitude</u> towards homosexuality."
• Explicit questionnaire: opposed [supported!] gay marriage & military enrollment
• (Ironic result: Smith's (2004, 2005) prediction that we *should* take ownership of our implicit biases as part of "real, deep selves," in order to take responsibility and thereby change them. In this case, *they change us*: taking "ownership" of implicit bias leads to revision of explicit)

How we <u>think</u> about our biases ("my real attitude"… "intentional") → how we act, i.e., how bias influences judgment, action.
→ Lesson about norms & authority figures!
→ Situationism is false! <u>No effect</u> on <u>un</u>biased participants! Only on implicitly biased.
  • (Inoculate yourself from demagoguery by eliminating your implicit biases!)
  • (2nd-best option: self-alienation: "My gut reactions don't reflect my genuine beliefs!")
• Situations matter, but their power depends on the minds in those situations (person-situation interactions). Compare: Haslam & Reicher (2006) on Milgram, Zimbardo, etc.
→ Limitations of "Aversive Racism" Narrative! These studies (and recent political events!) suggest that our collective explicit egalitarianism may be much more fragile (and less determinate?) than commonly appreciated.

<u>Does implicit bias against X = "I dislike X"?</u> (Lee, Lindquist, and Payne 2017)
• Implicit racial bias ≠ any specific explicit emotion (anger, sadness, guilt, fear, etc.)
• Implicit bias <u>does</u> correlate with average of all explicit negative (vs. positive) emotions
• *Emotion manipulation*: "Research has demonstrated that White Americans commonly hold negative associations with Blacks compared to Whites... Empirical evidence suggests that these negative associations are often due to feelings of <u>fear</u> [<u>sympathy</u>] because of beliefs about the status of Blacks in American society."
→ Now people openly report: "Blacks are scary"… "Blacks are threatening"
→ Fear condition + implicit bias → judge that black male faces were angrier.
→ Sympathy condition: participants did not report fear. But <u>nor</u> did they report sympathy!
• The indeterminacy is therefore <u>constrained</u>; the range of interpretations is <u>limited</u>. Metacognition matters, but the range (horizon) of interpretations is not infinitely flexible!
→ It's easy to interpret implicit bias content as "fear" or "not fear;" it's harder but maybe sometimes possible to interpret as "sympathy;" it's probably impossible to interpret as joy.

<u>Propositions or associations?</u>
Propositional view (e.g., "Muslims are more likely to be terrorists"):
  - Right that implicit biases have content. Wrong to portray that content as so fine-grained.
Associative view (e.g., when you think "terrorist," you think "Muslim," and vice versa)
  - A <u>virtue</u> to portray "content" as open-ended (subject to interpretation and context).
  - Wrong to portray it as <u>too</u> open-ended. It's not that <u>anything</u> goes.
Indeterminacy view: indeterminate-but-not-radically-flexible content: *vaguely bad*!
  - The reasonable options for disambiguating implicit anti-black bias are not <u>all</u> bad.

- But they're mostly bad! Implicit biases <u>are still biases.</u>
- Implicit biases <u>take on determinate meanings, implications, and effects</u> in context. (Cesario et al. 2010)

5. Objections and Alternative Interpretations

<u>Epistemicism</u>? Maybe contents are determinate but we just don't (can't?) <u>know</u> what they are (cf. Williamson on vagueness; are we looking at indeterminacy, or underdetermination?)

- I agree these studies highlight our limited self-knowledge! Biases are often felt but not noticed, or noticed but misinterpreted, or interpreted appropriately but underestimated…
- "Nothing is more difficult than knowing precisely <u>what we see</u>" (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 59).
- But it's hard to imagine the empirical evidence or underlying metaphysical truths that could ground the fact of its being some particular, determinate content rather than another.
- Our implicit biases are always formed and activated and changed <u>in some context or other,</u> cannot be fully decontextualized or isolated.
- By contrast, we <u>can know</u> that this-bias-in-this-mind-in-this-body-in-this-environment-with-these-norms is… fear of African Americans.
- But which metaphysical facts or empirical evidence could determine the content absent that context? How to non-circularly settle which contexts are "right" for eliciting "real" content?

<u>Disjunctive Content?</u> (Not inconsistent with epistemicism! Cf. perceptual disjunctivists)
Maybe contents are determinate, but disjunctive. *Fear-in-context-A, anxiety-in-context-B*, etc.
- Again, I feel some sympathy: implicit bias <u>becomes</u> determinate once embedded in context.
Pragmatic tiebreaker (inspired by Haslanger's metaphysics of race and gender)? Which views about the content of implicit bias will best serve our social-political aim of resisting oppression? What is the best way to conceptualize implicit biases for the purposes of reducing prejudice and discrimination? Which view is most useful for generating new empirical research?
- My hunch: with great indeterminacy comes great responsibility! The biases we carry within us hold the potential for just or unjust action depending on our other beliefs, goals, values, etc., and depending on our contexts: authority figures, perceived norms, power relations, etc.
- (Also, in many cases, the ambiguity of implicit bias <u>is</u> precisely one of the harms.)
- (Also: good luck with the infinite project of listing the full disjunction… Isn't disjunctivism tantamount to giving up on the explanatory project altogether?)

Coda: Implicit Bias as a *Signal to Be Just*? (Shelton et al. 2005, Gonsalkorale et al. 2009)
- Sometimes implicit biases <u>are</u> associated with "positive" social behavior
- If you put an implicit bias in the mind of a person strongly, internally committed to justice, with supportive peers and authority figures, etc., then they might learn to <u>interpret</u> that ambiguous signal as: "I have an opportunity to resist my impulses and do right right now!"
- See Monteith et al.'s (1993) "<u>Self-Regulation of Prejudice</u>" model
- "awareness of one's biases can create negative self-directed affect [guilt!] particularly among people who are personally motivated to respond without bias, which is essential to instigating processes that will facilitate less stereotypic and prejudiced responding in the future" (Burns et al. 2017; cf. Fricker & Medina on self-critical awareness and epistemic friction)

<u>Nudges, Norms, & Raising Awareness</u> (Duguid & Thomas-Hunt 2015)
"<u>The vast majority of people have stereotypical preconceptions </u>and their impressions and evaluations of others are consistently biased by these stereotypic preconceptions."
    → Bias training *increases* stereotypical judgments and biased social behavior
"<u>The vast majority of people try to overcome their stereotypic preconceptions</u>…"
    → Now bias training *reduces* stereotypical judgments and less biased behavior