

SCIENCE BRIEFS

Ordinary Prejudice

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It is Fall 2000, and I am teaching Introductory Psychology. We have completed a discussion of Stanley Milgram's demonstration of obedience to authority. Given the pace at which the topics must move in such a course, we are onto a different subject the following week, and a group of students stays behind to discuss the question of racial profiling. Articulate and angry, a student speaks about the shooting of Amadou Diallo, shot 41 times for being Black. I attempt to keep the discussion focused on the psychological and social mechanisms that led Diallo to be shot for a crime he did not commit, but it is fast becoming clear that in the heat of the discussion nothing from the previous week's lecture about the power of the social situation is even remotely on their minds. I prompt the students to imagine being a police officer in that situation and to predict their own response—would they have behaved differently? The angry student is incredulous that I would suggest any similarity between her and those police officers. Another sheepishly offers that he might have responded similarly. Yet, he too capitulates and, with a nervous laugh akin to the twitch of Milgram's own subject, concludes, "But I would not have fired as many times." I am sufficiently disappointed at the robustness of their deflection that I assign myself a score of 60 out of 100 for teaching ability and, even with grade inflation, that's a straight D.

I do not study the issues that Stanley Milgram did, nor do I bring to my work anywhere the same talent or flair. But in my work on unconscious social cognition, I've noticed that the responses to the discoveries themselves share something in common—surprise at the outcome and, often, a tenacious rejection of the relevance of the finding to oneself. The former I understand, perhaps because I too was surprised, in fact numbed, by evidence of the biases in my own mind. Tenacious rejection that such thoughts and feelings are one's own I can also understand, but



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not easily among those who have the privilege of formal education. What social psychology has given to an understanding of human nature is the discovery that forces larger than ourselves determine our mental life and our actions—that chief among these forces are our individual learning histories and the power of the social situation. As reasonable as this idea may seem, and as willingly as it might be accepted in the abstract, the discovery that learning histories and the immediate situation may have their influence outside consciousness is hard to contend with. The students in my class are only one datum, but they are an important one

because at this school the Milgram discussion is always intense and especially poignant. The inability to draw the parallel to oneself, to realize the possible lack of control over one's thoughts and actions is stark and, I would add, psychologically interesting in its own right. It is difficult to see the power of the situation in oneself when the outcome is unpalatable, just as it is difficult to see the influence of any cause that is not immediate. Consciousness, the feature at the center of what makes humans unique, is the culprit, for it permits a view of who we are and what we are capable of that is independent of the knowledge and feelings that may drive beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.

Our minds contain knowledge of which we are unaware. Our feelings can be impervious to the assertion of conscious will. Our behaviors subsume acts that are unintended, even opposed to those that are intended or consciously desired. In the social world, as each act has its influence, the effects are sometimes benign and even beneficial, at other times harmful and damaging. Among those who study the bounded rationality of human thought is a subset of investigators who have chosen to examine automatic thoughts and feelings that concern what may be the most important object in our world—other humans. To what extent do we, when making assessments of others, unconsciously use knowledge about the social groups to which they belong? To what extent is such knowledge discrepant from or in line with more deliberative and conscious thoughts? Are such unconscious thoughts and feelings themselves susceptible to influence, even if not to conscious will? What are the implications of discoveries about unconscious forms of stereotyping and prejudice in individual minds and in societal aspirations of equality and justice? To answer these questions we have followed a research tradition that begins with the radical idea that interpersonal benefits and harm that accrue through stereotypes

and prejudice are ordinary in origin—they operate via the routine mechanisms of perception, memory, categorization, and decision-making. Just as these processes operate outside awareness, control, intention, and self-reflection, so do their more value-laden versions concerning stereotypes and attitudes about individual humans and the social groups to which they belong. Accompanying such interpersonal decision-making are evaluations of whether one is a “good” person or not, and it is perhaps this feature that dictates the assessment of the findings themselves (i.e., their acceptance or rejection).

My colleagues and I have conducted research on implicit social cognition, first by offering demonstrations that our minds contain knowledge about social groups (stereotypes) and attitudes (prejudice) toward them—whether we want to or not. We expect that such processes operate in ordinary ways in the course of everyday life—whether we wish them to or not. And the implication of this discovery poses a challenge to those who argue in seminars, in diversity training workshops, and in private decisions that all we need do is to simply rise above social group categories, to put them aside in our judgments. That may be a luxury afforded to conscious thought and feeling, not necessarily to judgments that have their basis in implicit social cognition.

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In this research we have used variations of procedures used in many other laboratories, with the nuances of particular procedures constantly under discussion and undergoing improvement. We assume that: (1) strength of evaluative (favorable-unfavorable) and other attributes (say American-foreign) elicited by a social object can be measured; (2) such associations between object and attributes are revealed in the ease with which they are mentally paired with the object; (3) one measure of the strength of such associations is the mental speed involved in making object+attribute pairs; and (4) the men-

tal strength of object+attribute pairs is a measure of automatic stereotype, attitude, and identity. For instance, the strength of the *elderly+good* pairing is taken as a rough index of automatic attitude, the strength of *elderly+frail* pairing is taken as a measure of that automatic stereotype, and the strength of the *elderly+me* pairing is taken as a measure of that automatic identity between self and elderly.

We have moved beyond demonstrations to investigate the mechanisms by which such effects assert their presence, their boundary conditions, their relationship to their conscious counterparts, and where they have their “fields of application and adaptation,” as William James said. In all of this research runs a thread that shows the ordinary nature of unconscious knowledge and attitudes in two senses. Ordinary first by comparison to a psychodynamic unconscious, as John Kihlstrom pointed out, and ordinary again in the sense that such expressions are not restricted to a fringe group whose conscious attitudes and values lie at the periphery of contemporary American attitudes, beliefs, and values. The measurements we take are from ordinary folk, college students as well as drop-in participants at a website (www.yale.edu/implicit). Developed in collaboration with Brian Nosek and Anthony Greenwald, the website currently functions as a demonstration site at which over a million tests measuring automatic versions of race preference, gender association to family-career, attitudes toward academic fields such as science and arts (and gender associations to them), self-esteem, age bias, and political attitudes in the last alleged election were completed.

Of the basic findings regarding implicit social cognition we have to date, the following summary may be offered:

(1) There are strong automatic preferences for in-groups, and such preferences may develop easily and quickly. Such preferences are not equally strong among members of all groups. Group membership effects on automatic attitude (i.e., liking for one’s own group) are moderated by the evaluative immaturity of the larger culture—members of groups that are socially liked, (i.e., considered “good”) show stronger lik-

ing for their group (e.g., White Americans, females) than those who are, by comparison, not (e.g., Black Americans, males).

(2) Knowledge associated with social groups is automatically activated (e.g., *Black+athlete*, *White+American*). Such activations accrue in the minds of both members of the group and non-members. As the attributes associated to groups increase in evaluativeness (good vs. bad), group membership effects become more visible (with group members showing stronger associations between favorable qualities and their group).

To what extent do we, when making assessments of others, unconsciously use knowledge about the social groups to which they belong?

(3) Full dissociations between implicit and explicit measures may be found such that *mean values* on one type of measure may reliably reveal positive evaluation while the other may reveal negative evaluation. Such data suggest the possibility of distinct, psychometrically meaningful constructs capturing implicit and explicit social cognition.

(4) Yet, the two forms, implicit and explicit social cognition, are not so dissociated at the individual level. Correlations between implicit and explicit attitudes are routinely positive (albeit in some cases quite low) and, after measurement error is accounted for, often rise to substantial levels. Shown in research by Cunningham and Nezlek, those individuals who score higher on conscious levels of prejudice toward five different social group dichotomies are also higher on unconscious levels of prejudice.

(5) Automatic attitudes and knowledge are sensitive to recent experience. In a series of experiments conducted in several labs (Blair, Dasgupta, Hardin) and a dissertation conducted at Yale (Carpenter), there is now evidence that exposure to associations that are not dominant (e.g., *female+strong*, *Black*

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+good) can sufficiently reorient the representation of the attitude object, so as to elicit attitudes that reflect the influence of the most recent representation.

There is no question in my mind that these initial results are only the beginning of new learning about the nature of unconscious social cognition and its pervasive influence in human affairs. Some of the discoveries to date are ones that we would not have anticipated and even fly in the face of common sense and our own predictions. For this reason, it is important that lessons from an earlier social psychology be readily available. Just as social psychology's demonstrations of the power of the social situation revealed something stunning and even jarring about the ordinary nature of horrific behavior, research on unconscious social cognition has the potential to nudge us similarly toward unappealing conclusions about ourselves: that the stuff in our minds about ourselves and other humans, about our social groups and theirs, can be activated automatically and that once activated they can potentially produce psychologically and socially beneficial and harmful effects.

For the students discussing the shooting of Diallo who had difficulty imagining their own vulnerability given the press of a social situation, I began class the next day with a few lines from *Midnight Salvage*, a poem by Adrienne Rich:

lucky I am I hit nobody old or young
killed nobody left no trace
practiced in life as I am

When the behavior in question is not the firing of an automatic weapon, but the firing of an automatic feeling or thought, infinitely greater luck is required, practiced in life as we all are.

For students of mind and social behavior, the first step is to come to terms with the blunt fact of our bounded rationality and its ethical and moral consequences for giving "mental due process," even if, and especially if, the view of ourselves it reveals is not charming. ■

Distinguished Scientist Lecturers Chosen for 2001 Regional Meetings

David Buss, Ed Diener, and Peter Salovey have been chosen to participate in the 2001 APA Distinguished Scientist Lecture Program. As part of this program, which is sponsored jointly by APA's Science and Education Directorates, four of the seven regional psychological associations' annual meetings will feature an address by one of the 2001 Distinguished Scientist Lecturers. The remaining three regional meetings will feature a G. Stanley Hall Lecturer. The Board of Scientific Affairs (BSA), with the support of the regional association presidents, developed the program 11 years ago as part of its ongoing mission to promote scientific psychology.

Buss will present his research on "Jealousy, infidelity, and why men and women torture each other" at the Midwestern Psychological Association meeting in Chicago, Illinois, May 3-5, 2001, and also at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association meeting in Reno, Nevada, April 20-22, 2001. He is a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Buss is most well known for his theoretical work in evolutionary psychology and his empirical work on the strategies of human mating.



DAVID BUSS



ED DIENER

Diener is the Alumni Professor of Psychology (a distinguished chair endowed by the alumni) at the University of Illinois, where he has taught since 1974. He studies subjective well-being, a topic on which he has published widely and recently edited three books. Diener will speak on "Are some societies happier than others? An examination of subjective well-being across cultures" at the New England Psychological Association meeting, October 19-20, 2001, in Danbury, Connecticut.

A professor of psychology and of epidemiology and public health at Yale University, Salovey also serves as the department chair for psychology. His research focuses on the psychological significance and function of human moods and emotion. He also studies the application of social psychological principles to motivate health protective behaviors. Salovey's address, titled "Preventing cancer and HIV with appropriately framed messages," will be featured at the Southwestern Psychological Association meeting in Houston, Texas, April 20-22, 2001. ■



PETER SALOVEY

Call for Nominations for Distinguished Scientists

Do you know someone who would make an excellent Distinguished Scientist Lecturer? BSA is currently seeking nominations for the 2002 Distinguished Scientist Lecture Program. All nominations must include a letter stating the nominee's qualifications and an updated curriculum vita. Nominees must be actively engaged in research and be excellent public speakers. Please send nominations by **February 15, 2001**, to Kate Haber in the APA Science Directorate, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242. For more information, call (202) 336-6000 or e-mail khaber@apa.org. ■