The Inside Story
Mahzarin R. Banaji on Discovering Experimental Social Psychology

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Graduating from high school in India at age 15, I had but a single goal—to leave my well-adjusted and secure family to live the patently more daring and exciting life of a secretarial assistant. Proficient at typing scores of words a minute, I looked forward to a life of independence that involved living a block away from my parents. My mother, despite not having attended college, persuaded me to try college—but only for a semester, we agreed, after which I would be free to choose my path.

The end of my first semester at Nizam College came and went. Mother didn't ask about my plans. I didn't have to swallow and tell. Just before one holiday trip home, I bought the five volumes of the 1968 *Handbook of Social Psychology* for the equivalent of a dollar a piece (it seemed like a lot of book for the money). By the end of a 24-hour train ride home, I had polished off one volume and knew with blunt clarity that this science, which studied social processes experimentally, was something I had to do. Psychophysics and Marxian sociology, my areas of expertise until then, went out the window.

Doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships enabled me to work with three remarkable people early in my career: Tony Greenwald at Ohio State, and Claude Steele and Elizabeth Loftus at the University of Washington. At Yale, while still interested in human memory researchers, I discovered that memories come in both explicit (conscious) and implicit (unconscious) forms. Might this also be true of attitudes, beliefs, and values? Hesitantly, I wrote the words "Implicit Attitudes" as the title of a grant proposal, not knowing it would become such a central part of what my students and I would study for the next two decades.

With Tony Greenwald and Brian Nosek, I have enjoyed an extended collaboration on implicit social cognition that few scientists are blessed with. From the hundreds of studies that have used the Implicit Association Test (implicit.harvard.edu) and the millions of tests taken, we now know that people carry knowledge (stereotypes) and feelings (attitudes) of which they are unaware, and which often contrast with their conscious expressions. We know that subcortical brain activity can be an independent marker of implicit attitudes, that people differ in their implicit attitudes, and that such attitudes and stereotypes predict real life behavior. Most optimistically, we know that implicit attitudes, even old ones, can be modified by experience.

In the country in which I was born and raised, India, I was used to people being upfront about their beliefs, based on social class, caste, sect, language, and religion: "What did you expect from a tightfisted Marwadi?" would be an ordinary comment, one of several I might encounter in a given day. In my adopted country, America, beliefs about social groups seemed to be less in my face, but its effects were nevertheless present if only I picked up a magnifying glass. Observing my two cultures has likely fueled my interest in consciousness and in three forces that shape social behavior: human evolutionary history, personal history over the lifespan, and the immediate situation—the latter, whose demonstrable power I first discovered in the *Handbook* in India and that lured me to psychology and to America.