Our Implicit Biases

Centuries after Aristotle said, "Know thyself," most of us still have a lot to learn about ourselves. Thanks to Sigmund Freud, we realize that at least some of our actions are driven by unconscious motives. Thanks to B.F. Skinner we also know how easy it is to be conditioned to act in certain ways without our awareness. But when it comes to our personal beliefs about ourselves, we ought to know what we're talking about, right? Well, maybe not.

A growing body of research using a new tool called the Implicit Association Test, created by Tony Greenwald at the University of Washington and developed further by Greenwald and Harvard professor Mahzarin Banaji, demonstrates how our unconscious biases conflict with our professed beliefs. Here's how it works. You pick a topic about which you have an opinion, let's say growing older. Words or photos that reference that topic (e.g., "elderly," or "young") are flashed on a computer screen and paired either with positive attributes (e.g., "wise," "kindly") or negative attributes ("slow," "mean"). The pairs are presented to the right and left sides of the screen. Your task is to hit a key on the key board either to the right or left, depending on the instructions. Sometimes you are asked to respond to positive attributes paired with "older" and negative with "younger," and sometimes to the opposite pairings. The computer merely measures your reaction time to the various paired items, then averages your responses over many trials, during which the words or pictures switch sides of the screen. Once you are done the program reports your tendency to associate certain positive or negative attributes to the topic studied. Anybody can take the test, on any number of topics, and it's free! Just go to www.implicit.harvard.edu.

Drs. Greenwood and Banaji have now published the results of their research in a new book called *Blind Spot: The Hidden Biases of Good People,* published by Delacorte Press. The early research studied racial biases and showed that even liberal minded persons associate non-European races with negative traits, as measured by their reaction times to these pairings. More recently topics include gender roles, weight gain, aging, mental illness, and nationality. In each case what we say we believe does not always correspond to how quickly we respond to certain stereotypes. Greenwald and Banaji suggest that our minds learn to categorize other people early in life as either the "in-group" or the "out-group." We attribute positive qualities to the in-group and negative qualities to the out-group. We tend to favor the in-group and distance ourselves from the out-group. Sometimes the in-group stereotype represents people like us, but not always. For example, even elderly people show a positive bias toward younger people compared to older people on the IAT. Furthermore our hidden biases are often better predictors of our behavior in real-life situations than our conscious beliefs. For example, a strong *men=science* bias in women as measured by the IAT is a better predictor of women's choice of college majors than is their conscious endorsement of the *men=science* stereotype.

Beyond stereotype biases, research presented at the recent meeting of the Association for Psychological Science (APS, San Francisco, May, 2014) also demonstrates the usefulness of the IAT for studying clinical populations. For example, biased reaction times to self/suicide pairings better predicted future suicide attempts by depressed persons than did their conscious estimates of future risk. Pairing specific objects and anxious cues (such as internal states) better predicts phobic reactions to those objects than does responses to questionnaires.

Ultimately the IAT may provide us insight into what it means to be human. At the recent APS meeting Dr. Banaji suggested that human beings learn early what group they belong to and who they should associate with. These implicit associations are part of the glue that binds families, tribes, religious sects, regional affiliations, races, and national allegiances. The merging of various groups in America over the past several hundred years has become a natural experiment to see how well various groups can expand to incorporate others not quite like ourselves. The world itself is following suit and changing from a collection of tightly bound homogeneous groups to broadly defined heterogeneous populations governed by laws rather than natural affinity. These laws of incorporation are the product of the conscious and rational networks of our brains, what Daniel Kahnemann calls Type 2 systems, and not the implicit associations that occur unconsciously. As Dr. Banaji suggested in her presentation, the challenge for groups who want to live with each other peacefully is to decouple some of these stubborn implicit biases that set them against each other.

Take the IAT and check out some of your own unconscious biases. You just might get to Know Yourself a little better!

Banaji, M.R., Greenwald, A.G. *Blind Spot: The Hidden Biases of Good People.* 2014. Delacorte Press.