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IMPLICIT BIAS AND SOCIAL COGNITION

Recent decades have seen large advances in the understanding of social cognition. One set of unsettling findings are about what have come to be called implicit biases, unconscious negative evaluative tendencies about individuals based on their membership in a social group. The existence and character of implicit biases raise a variety of interesting issues for different areas of philosophy, including many relevant to the social sciences. Getting into a position to address those issues requires becoming familiar with implicit biases themselves, the sorts of tools psychologists have developed to investigate them, and some of their more noteworthy features. The final section will briefly describe some of the initial implications about implicit biases that have been drawn for philosophy and the social sciences.

Useful Distinctions

Implicit biases may not fit easily with an intuitive picture of the mind, so social psychologists have made a number of clarifying distinctions to characterize them. A mental state or process is *automatic* if it is typically outside of a person's conscious control, and can influence a person's behavior and judgment without deliberation, attention or effort. Many, though not all, automatic mental states or processes are also *implicit*; they

are outside of person's conscious awareness. To study automatic and implicit mental states, social psychologists have developed a number of sophisticated experimental techniques, often called indirect measures. Much of what is known about implicit biases has been inferred from people's performance on tasks that use such techniques. The measures are said to be *indirect* in that they do not directly rely on subjects' powers of introspection or self-report, and are able to avoid the problems associated with both. In these tasks, people who harbor implicit biases show a slight but consistent negative evaluation of members of whatever social group they are implicitly biased against, relative to members of other social groups. For instance, those with implicit biases against the elderly will be more likely show a slight preference for young and middle aged people, those with implicit biases against women will show a preference for men, and those with implicit biases against Blacks will show a preference for Whites, or Latinos, etc. Implicit biases directed towards social groups defined along a number of dimensions have been found: race, gender, sexual orientation, age, weight, religion, etc. Details about implicit biases (the social groups they are directed at, their strength, even their presence) can vary from person to person, as well as from culture to culture (though little cross-cultural research has been done).

Features of Implicit Social Cognition

One consistent and striking finding of this research is that within a single person, implicit biases against a particular social group are distinct from, and can coexist with, consciously endorsed attitudes to the contrary. For example, when directly asked, a person might sincerely state about herself that she is not racist, and holds tolerant,

egalitarian views towards all races, thus expressing her *explicit* attitudes. Nevertheless, indirect testing can reveal that she also harbors *implicit* biases against members of certain races. Indeed, research has shown that it is possible to harbor implicit biases against social groups that one is a member of oneself, i.e. one's own race, gender, etc.

Initial studies into development suggest that though implicit biases are not easy to uproot, they are fairly easy to acquire. Certain types, implicit racial biases, appear to be widespread, at least in the United States. The influence of implicit biases on behavior, especially behavior in the real world outside of controlled laboratory experiments, is difficult to measure with precision, but mounting evidence indicates that implicit biases towards a particular social group can subtly shape a person's evaluations of and interactions with members of the social group to which they apply.

Another area of research explores the ways that implicit biases might be managed or controlled. For instance, once a person becomes aware that she harbors implicit biases towards a certain social group, she might make an effort to explicitly suppress the expression of those biases, in both judgment and behavior. This has been shown to work to some extent, but requires vigilance, is mentally fatiguing, and can backfire in a number of ways. Other forms of self-control not based on suppression, such as making an active attempt to see others as individuals rather than members of category or social group, appear to fair better. Moreover, taking less direct steps such as exposing oneself to positive images of, or having positive interactions with, members of the social group in question has also been shown to lessen the influence of implicit biases.

Philosophical Issues

Philosophers have just begun to take note of implicit biases, and to examine their implications. The work of those who have can be divided into two broad groups. First, those interested in the epistemology and conceptual foundations of the social sciences, especially those who think many of the central concepts (races, genders, classes, etc.) pick out kinds that are *socially constructed*, have begun exploring how features of social cognition affect the construction and stability of those concepts and kinds. They have emphasized how full explanations of the sorts of regularities studied by social scientists can incorporate, and sometimes may require, appeal to features of individual psychologies, including elements of social cognition like implicit biases.

Second, those interested in social justice have seen implicit biases as relevant to a number of issues. Some have attempted to understand how they contribute to social inequalities like persistent gender and racial disparities, emphasizing that the moral problems raised by such cases are intertwined with the epistemic burdens imposed by the implicit biases involved. Philosophers are also beginning to investigate how social and legal institutions might best take implicit biases into account, and assign responsibility for individual behaviors and institutional outcomes that are influenced by them. Another preliminary line of inquiry has attempted to evaluate various proposals for social reform in light of what is known about social cognition and implicit biases.

In sum, research on implicit biases, into the psychology of the biases themselves, their influence on the behavior of institutions, and their implications for understanding groups and population level social dynamics, is barely out of its infancy; there remains much fertile and exciting territory to explore.

Daniel Kelly

See also Prejudice and Stereotyping; Race, Theories of; Social Cognition; Social Constructivism; Unconscious Social Behaviour

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