

CHAPTER 21

MAKING RACE OUT OF NOTHING: PSYCHOLOGICALLY CONSTRAINED SOCIAL ROLES

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21.1. INTRODUCTION

Race is one of the most common variables in the social sciences, used to draw correlations between racial groups and numerous other important variables such as education, health care outcomes, aptitude tests, wealth, employment and so forth. But where concern with race once reflected the view that races were biologically real, many, if not most, contemporary social scientists have abandoned the idea that racial categories demarcate substantial, intrinsic biological differences between people. This, in turn, raises an important question about the significance of race in those social sciences: If there is no biological basis of race, why are racial categories useful to social scientists? More specifically, in virtue of what are racial categories a successful basis of informative, important social scientific generalizations?¹ We'll call this social science's *race puzzle*.

A main aim of this chapter is to set out the sort of solution that has typically been given to this race puzzle, and suggest some ways in which such a solution might be extended and improved. We begin by developing what we will call the *standard answer*: Racial categories are not biological groupings, but are rather social roles of some sort. These social roles are produced and sustained by cultural understandings,

social conventions, institutions, and common practices of classification. Those social roles, in turn, causally influence the individual persons that occupy them. Generalizations involving races are about individuals occupying the same type of (racial) social role, and the regularities those generalizations capture exist because those individuals are subject to the same types of socially mediated causal influences.

While we believe the standard answer explanation of racial difference is basically correct, we hold that development of the standard answer's explanation of racial difference is hampered by an *anti-psychological bias* that manifests itself in the dearth of discussion of the underlying psychological mechanisms that support and shape racial social roles. We argue that appreciation of these mechanisms leaves us better equipped to explain a range of phenomena of importance to social scientists of race including:

1. The particular patterns of racial categorization and inference characteristic of racial categories.
2. The stability of racial categories over time and the reappearance of similar categories across cultures and history.
3. The nature and character of racism, and the sources and persistence of certain racial disparities.

In short, we argue that understanding the way racial social roles are *psychologically constrained* allows us to develop a more complete and satisfactory solution to the social sciences' race puzzle.

Here, then, is how we do this. In section 21.2, we set out a more detailed account of the standard answer. Then, in sections 21.3 and 21.4, we go on to illustrate the kind of recent work in evolutionary, cognitive, and social psychology can be used to develop a hybrid social constructionism about race. In section 21.3, we discuss recent developments in the evolutionary cognitive approach to racial categorization that suggest certain features of racial classification and generalization emerge from the nature of the particular cognitive mechanisms subserving those capacities. Then, in section 21.4, we go on to discuss recent work in the social psychology of racism suggesting that many racial evaluations emerge as the result of implicit and automatic evaluation, and that the relevant mechanisms can contribute to different kinds of racial inequalities. Finally, in section 21.5, we pull strands of these previous discussions together to formulate the idea of a psychologically constrained social role. We briefly situate this idea with respect to other work in the social sciences that explores how what seem to be small factors operating at the level of individuals—what have been called micro-affirmations and micro-inequalities—can scale up to influence or create regularities at the level of groups and societies.

21.2. THE STANDARD ANSWER

The orthodox view of race and racial phenomena is that regularities expressed by generalizations using racial terminology exist as a consequence of current or past social conventions, practices of racial classification of persons, and the differential

treatment of those persons. We will unpack the two main components of this view: the denial of the biological reality of race, and an account of racial phenomena spelled out in terms of social roles, representations and practices of racial classification.

21.2.1. Denying the Biological Reality of Race

Denials of the biological reality of race rest on a combination of conceptual and empirical arguments. The most widespread conceptual argument involves characterizing “folk racialism,” a term used to capture the classificatory and inferential principles that implicitly govern folk conceptions of race, as committed to essentialism about racial categories. Essentialism here is the idea that categories like *black* or *white* pick out some inner, defining essence of those people they apply to. Such essentialism about race, however, is now widely recognized to be implausible on biological grounds. This is based both on the general considerations that lead contemporary biological thought to the abandonment of essentialist thinking about types (Mayr 1976, Sober 1980), and also on the specific consideration that intragroup variation in biological races is nearly as great as intragroup variation (Lewontin 1995), leaving candidate essences thin or nonexistent.

This consensus has not been complete. Some biologically oriented philosophers have suggested that the resulting anti-racialist view is both quite weak (Mallon 2007) and one that biologically sophisticated racialists would be unlikely to hold (Edwards 2003; Kitcher 1999; Mallon 2007; Sesardic 2003; 2010). Moreover, it has long been known that human populations—even ones that are geographically and ethnically closely related—are characterized by biological differences, including genetic differences, even if these differences are not essences (e.g. Ward and Neel 1970). More recently, the availability of ancestry identifying genetic tests and the public discussion over race-specific medicine have seemed to lend plausibility to the idea that racial categories have at least some biological correlates.

On the other hand, a host of additional arguments against the biological reality of race have also been advanced in recent decades. These include the claims that:

1. Genes are independently assorted, and so unlikely to cluster with racial membership (Lewontin 1972, 1974; but see Edwards 2003);
2. Human natural history is such that evolution is unlikely to have continued (Root 2000, but see Cochran et al. 2006; Hawks et al. 2007).
3. Human variability is continuous (e.g. Diamond 1994).
4. The kinds or populations identified by such a view would be unlikely to match up with folk racial divisions (Appiah 1996, 73; Glasgow 2003, 458ff; Zack 2002, 76).

Some take such arguments to undermine the existence of outright (Appiah 1996; Blum 2002; Zack 2002) while others argue for skepticism about race on broadly pragmatic grounds (Kitcher 2007). Still others remain unconvinced that there is no acceptable biological grounding for race (Edwards 2003; Sesardic 2010).

Our goal here is not to adjudicate this debate, but to explore and develop the possibilities for the standard answer as an account of racial difference. Despite ongoing debate about the biological or psychological (e.g. Rushton and Jenson 2005)

reality of race, and some evidence from what may be special cases (e.g. Cochran et al. 2006), many of the social sciences and humanities proceed on the assumption that biological races do not, in general, exist. It is this state of affairs that gives rise to what we're calling the race puzzle. Denying the biological reality or significance of race, or denying the explanatory relevance of whatever differences might exist, creates the need for an alternative, nonbiological account of those racial differences that *do* figure so prominently in the investigations and discoveries of contemporary social sciences.²

21.2.2. In Place of Biology, Step 1: Enlightened Realism about Social Practices

The standard answer explains many differential features of race by reference to our historical and contemporary classifications. In this regard, the standard answer is an instance of a more general strategy, common throughout the social sciences, of understanding certain regularities as being themselves produced by other social practices. Michael Root invokes the strategy clearly for the case of race:

Race is like marital status; no one would be married or single had we not invented matrimony; however, given that we did, we now divide our-selves along discernible boundaries, into categories like “husband” and “wife” or “single” and “divorced” and treat each other differently depending on which of these categories we belong to. So too with race; we assign each other a race and treat each other differently depending on that race. As a result, epidemiologists can discover that the rates of mortality or morbidity are different for one race than another even though race is not biological just as they can discover that health risks vary with marital status even though marital status is not in our genes. In other words, race can be a biologically salient category even though there are no biological races, and race can mark the risk of a biological condition like diabetes or heart disease even though race is not itself a biological condition but a social status. (2003, 1175)

This strategy may raise eyebrows of those concerned to defend a realist interpretation of the phenomena studied by social sciences, or of those who think that that science is or should be in the business of describing what is *real*. It might seem that, according to the standard answer, race is real only because we treat it as being real. Such worries, though understandable, are misplaced here; we need only recall that our social practices are real things, with real causal effects, and that any social science that left out these practices and their effects would surely provide an incomplete picture of the various social phenomena they seek to understand (Taylor 2000; Sundstrom 2002).

As it happens, racial classifications are used to express and explain numerous phenomena—for example, differential tuberculosis rates among American blacks (but not those in the United Kingdom) (Root 2000); differential test performances resulting from so-called stereotype threats (Steele 2010); different rates of drug use (Bachmann et al. 1991); or effects of race in jury selection (Haney-Lopez 2000).

21.2.3. In Place of Biology, Step 2: Racial Social Roles

From the recognition that social practices—conventions, patterns of classification and evaluation, and so forth—have real and systematic effects on individuals and social groups, one can begin to develop the notion of a social role. The fundamental idea of a social role is that the differential properties of individuals who fall in a human category are to be explained (at least in part) by the set of (stable) understandings, policies, and practices concerning proper classification and differential treatment that a community holds about of those persons. We can characterize this idea more precisely as follows:

- i. There is a term, label, or mental representation that picks out a category of persons *P*, and a set of beliefs and evaluations—or a *conception*—of the persons so picked out.
- ii. Many or all of the beliefs and evaluations in the conception of the role are widely shared by members of a community, as is the knowledge that they are widely shared, and so forth. That is, the conception of the category is *common knowledge*.³
- iii. Many of the beliefs and evaluations are action guiding, specifying appropriate behavior by and toward members of *P*.

Because communities use classifications of persons as a basis for identifications, predictions, explanations, and coordination, a conventionally secured social role creates a social context in which individuals in the category develop, live, and act. To the extent the representations and conventions constituting the role are stable, the actions and evaluations they motivate will be stable too. This illuminates how social roles can give rise to stable, socially produced regularities (cf. Mallon 2003).

Note, for now, that this way of unpacking the idea of a social role appeals to a variety of psychological entities: representations, beliefs, evaluations, knowledge, and the like. At this level of generality, we do not take ourselves to be saying anything controversial—any plausible spelling out of the idea of a social role must acknowledge that the causal pressures that shape social roles are psychologically mediated. Below we make our case for a stronger claim, roughly, that the character of the mediating psychology helps explain the character of the resultant social roles, and ultimately the character of the associated regularities and differences.

This is the burden we take up in the next two sections, where we consider two types of psychological systems that are implicated in racial cognition. First, in section 21.3, we explore the possibility that racial conceptions are shaped by innate, domain-specific, and species typical proclivities of the sort described in recent evolutionary and cognitive psychology. If those conceptions are thus influenced, then their associated social roles are as well, and it follows that understanding the relevant psychological proclivities can illuminate the explanation of racial difference. In section 21.4, we explore another sort of proclivity: implicit biases. We argue that specifically racial biases (which may well be learned) offer individual-level psychological mechanisms that ought to figure in standard answer explanations of

racial difference. Finally, in section 21.5 we discuss more generally how appreciation psychological proclivities can help shed light on the nature of the social roles that they shape, and hence help explain the types of regularities that many of the social sciences investigate.

21.3. AN EVOLUTIONARY COGNITIVE APPROACH TO RACIAL REPRESENTATIONS

21.3.1. Social Construction and The Race Puzzle

“Social constructionists,” as we use the term here, explain things as products of human culture and human decision. The standard answer is a sort of social constructionism about racial difference (and one we endorse) because it explains racial difference by appeal to human culture and the beliefs and practices that such culture structures.

However social constructionism about racial difference is traditionally paired with another sort of social constructionism: social constructionism about the *representations* that in part constitute the culture and social roles that figure in the standard answer. The claim is, in effect, that our individual or collective racial representations have the content that they do, rather than some other content (or no content at all), because of the content of transmitted human culture and human decision. Call this *parallel constructionism*, for it holds that the social construction of racial representations proceeds in parallel with the construction of racial difference among those represented.

In contrast, in this section, we pair social constructionism about racial difference with a partially nonconstructionist account of racial representations. We argue that the available empirical evidence better supports this view, which we call *hybrid constructionism*. Recent work in evolutionary and cognitive psychology has suggested that important features of racial representations are explained by appeal to mental mechanisms that are species-typical, domain-specific, and innate (Astuti et al. 2004; Hirschfeld 1996; Gil-White 2001a, 2001b; Gelman 2003; Machery and Faucher 2005a, 2005b; Jones 2009; cf. Mallon 2010). But we also note that traditional social constructionist explanations are ill equipped to explain the stability and distinctiveness of racial representations, and this compromises their ability to fully address social science’s race puzzle. In effect, we are arguing that relaxing one’s commitment to the social construction of racial representations strengthens one’s hand with respect to the social construction of race.

Social constructionist explanations of racial representations and recent evolutionary cognitive explanations of racial representations are different empirical hypotheses about why racial representations have the content they do. They also

make different predictions: evolutionary cognitive accounts suggest that at least some significant aspects of our racial representations are constrained by psychological mechanisms that are innate, domain-specific, and species-typical—in effect that racial representations are stabilized by features of human nature. In contrast, in insisting that racial representations are supported by human culture and decision alone, social constructionist explanations in effect suggest that such representations should vary considerably over historical time and across cultures as the content of culture itself shifts.

And this is, in fact, what constructionists say. For example, a frequent claim of humanists and many humanistically oriented social scientists is that the idea or concept of race was itself invented, perhaps at the end of the eighteenth or the beginning of the nineteenth century, but at least sometime since the Renaissance (e.g. Fredrickson 2002; Guillaumin 1980; Banton 1978). Racial thinking, according to this line of thought, is a socio-historically local product of the West, produced in a crucible of disparate forces that include the declining influence of the Roman Catholic church and of religion more generally, the rising influence of science, and the need for Europeans and Americans to justify their colonial adventures and slaveholding in a political environment in which democratic equality was an emerging norm (Fredrickson 2002). Not only are racial representations supposed to be historically local, but they are often said to be unstable, as in this much-quoted passage from Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*, wherein they urge “effort must be made to understand race as *an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle*” (1986, 68; italics in original). These claims express exactly what we should expect if social constructionism about racial representations were true, for without a culturally independent reality to track (for race is not biologically real) *and* in the absence of psychological proclivities stabilizing the content of racial representations, racial representations would be relatively unconstrained, exhibiting a lack of stability over time.

21.3.2. Evolutionary Cognitive Accounts of Racial Essentialism

Recent evolutionary cognitive work suggests the possibility of a more stable core of racial representations that, despite numerous changes in cultural understanding over time, is organized by the theoretical assumption of *racial essentialism*. While essentialism is a fixture of social theoretical discussions of race and many other kinds (e.g. Putnam 1975; Appiah 1996; Mallon 2007), recent psychological work suggests its role in categorization judgments, inductions, and inferences involving inheritance in the biological and racial domains (Hirschfeld 1996; Astuti et al. 2004; Kanovsky 2007; Jones 2009; Mallon 2010). In the biological and racial domains, such essentialism amounts to the assumption that kind-membership is underwritten by an underlying explanatory property that both explains kind-typical properties and is passed on in biological inheritance. For example, knowing that an

individual baby animal or plant seed is of a certain kind causes children to judge that it will develop the typical properties associated with that kind, even when its developmental environment is characteristic of another kind. And Susan Gelman and Henry Wellman (1991, experiments 3, 4 and 5) showed that 4-year-old children judge that a baby cow, raised by pigs, will nonetheless say “moo” rather than “oink.” The work suggests such patterns emerge early (Hirschfeld 1996) and cross-culturally (Astuti et al. 2004; Atran 1990, 1998; Atran and Medin 2008; Gil-White 2001a, 2001b; Kanovsky 2007; Jones 2009; cf. Mallon 2010) in the biological and racial domains, and because of the parallels, suggests a common psychological mechanism at work in both domains. While the specific content of, for example, American racial categories is tied to the American racial context, human groupings organized by similar, essentialist assumptions are relatively easy to find across a range of cultures. For instance, while Indian castes have many differences among themselves and with American racial classifications, they nonetheless exhibit the idea that “to be of high or low caste is a matter of innate quality or essence” (Bayly 1999, 10).

Many evolutionary cognitive theorists hypothesize that racial cognition shares a common structure with biological cognition, and some view this structure as an evolutionary *adaptation*. However, in part because they do not believe in biological race, evolutionary cognitive theorists do not believe this mechanism is adapted *for* thinking *about race*. Rather, they believe it is adapted for some other domain—for example, for thinking about important social kinds (Hirschfeld 1996) or about human ethnic groups (Gil-White 2001a).

21.3.3. The Explanatory Relevance of Evolutionary Cognitive Accounts

These features of the mechanism thought to underlie racial categorization, together with the assumption made by most theorists that the mechanism in question is a part of an innate, species-typical psychological endowment of humankind, can explain features of racial representations that are important and relevant to a wide range of investigations of racial thought and racial difference in the contemporary humanities and social sciences. Here we focus upon three examples: category stability, patterns of cultural commonality and variation, and the distinctiveness of the causal effects of racial categories.

21.3.3.1. *Category Stability*

We have already noted social constructionists’ emphasis on the malleability and instability of racial representations. But the suggestion that categories are so unstable raises the question of how could they be the basis for successful generalizations in the social sciences—in effect, threatening to undermine the standard answer’s social role strategy for answering the race puzzle.

Consider Signithia Fordham and John Uzo Ogbu’s controversial and influential claim that American blacks’ lower performance in schools than white peers was the

result of a black culture that devalues excelling at school as “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986). This hypothesis suggests that students manage their behavior in ways that attempt to balance the needs of successful self-presentation to ones peers against other values, and it fits nicely as an example of social role explanation of differential behavior. However, subsequent research has cast doubt on the explanation. In 2003, Karolyn Tyson and William Darity Jr. directed a North Carolina study that found no difference in school attitudes between white and black students. However, more recent work by Roland Fryer and Paul Torelli (2010) suggest there may still be something to the idea. Crucially, for our purposes, is the question of if and how such findings might generalize. If racial representations are so unstable, it is unclear how claims about, for example, black North Carolinian attitudes toward education in North Carolina in the twenty-first century could generalize to, or have any bearing at all on claims about black Californian attitudes toward education in the late twentieth century. Unless we take the predicate “black” to have a common meaning purporting to pick out a single sort of person, it is unclear how a social role structured by such meaning could perform explanatory work stably across time and space.

Elsewhere, one of us has argued that some stability can be achieved in a social milieu in which conventions of classification are at some sort of equilibrium with the social regularities they produce (Mallon 2003; also see Hacking 1995, 1999). Appeal to equilibria is less and less plausible over further and further stretches of time and cultural distance. However, once we recognize that folk racial conceptions are structured by underlying assumptions of racial essentialism, we can see that variation in beliefs about race over time often overlies (and leaves untouched) an essentialist theoretical core that explains the stability of racial classifications over broader expanses of time and space.

21.3.3.2. *Patterns of Cultural Variation*

Of course, to say that evolutionary cognitive explanations of racial essentialism explain some aspects of racial representations is not to say that all aspects of those representations are fixed by innate, domain-specific, species-typical mechanisms. This leads to a prediction: There should be less variation across time and cultures in features of the representation that reflect underlying essentialist assumptions, and more variation in those beliefs that escape such assumptions.

A case in point is mixed-race categories. If folk racial essentialism is the product of applying a mechanism to human groups that is adapted to producing judgments about certain sorts of biological populations, then it makes sense to think that it would have little to say in cases where human populations are unlike biological species. For while (many sorts of) biological species exhibit considerable reproductive isolation, human populations readily interbreed. So the anthropologist Doug Jones (2009) and one of us (Mallon 2010) have each predicted that principles for the categorization of mixed race individuals should vary more widely across cultures than principles for the categorization of individuals with biological or cultural groups, and Jones (2009) has argued that this is indeed the case.

If borne out, this prediction looks to have practical consequences. For it suggests that a certain strand of racial skepticism born of attention to the ubiquity of mixed-race individuals in the modern world (Zack 1992) has a foundation in our cognitive architecture. When we attend to the complexity of mixed biological parenthood, we may dumbfound the essentialist assumptions by which our minds attempt to organize our social world. Something like this is almost certainly at work in the widely remarked upon diminished role of race in Latin American life. The historian George Fredrickson (2002) writes:

[In Latin America] an attempt to order society on the basis of *castas* defined in terms of color and ethnicity eventually broke down because the extent and variety of *mestizaje* (interracial marriage and concubinage) created such an abundance of types that the system collapsed into the three basic categories of white, *mestizo*, and Indian. Those categories lacked the rigidity of true racial divisions, because aspirants to higher status who possessed certain cultural and economic qualifications could often transcend them. (39–40)

21.3.3.3. *The Causal Effects of Racial Categories*

An ongoing feature of theoretical conversation about racial categories is how such categories related to other categories like class, sex, gender, ethnicity, and so forth. One distinctive feature of racial classification that looks to be an outgrowth of the kind of essentialism that orders the biological domain is the inheritance of racial membership. In this way, racial membership looks unlike other categories that have been social bases of oppression. This difference also looks to have systematic effects. Consider, for example, that contemporary blacks typically have a greater percentage of black ancestors than contemporary whites do (while they don't differ in the same way in the percentage of, for example, women ancestors). This, in turn, means that past oppression of blacks exerts causal effects differentially on current generations of blacks in a way that past oppression of women does not. Consider that according to the Federal Reserve, white Americans possessed *ten times* the wealth of black Americans in 2007 (Lui 2009). Because wealth is typically passed on by descent in parallel with race, past racial oppression cascades down to current generations, differentially influencing members of different races. If the evolutionary cognitive program is right, the distinctive way that racial membership is inherited may be in part a product of the cognitive proclivities underwriting folk racial categories—mechanisms that tie racial membership with racial inheritance (Mallon 2010).

21.4. IMPLICIT BIASES AND RACE

In this section we shift gears to focus on a different research program, one that investigates what social psychologists call implicit biases. While the evolutionary cognitive program discussed in the last section held that specific aspects of racial

representations might be the product of innate, domain-specific, and species-typical proclivities to essentialize human groups, we make no similar nativist claim about implicit racial biases. Implicit racial biases appear to be members of a family of more general biases that can be directed at a range of different types of people; research has revealed implicit race biases, but also implicit gender biases, implicit age biases, and so forth. Moreover, the ontogenetic origin of such biases remains unclear, and they may be acquired via individual or social learning. Our main focus here is on the evaluative component of racial cognition, and its connection to features like the sources and persistence of racial disparities found at population levels. We begin by describing a prominent approach to understanding such disparities—one that emphasizes *institutional racism*, and we discuss its connection to the race puzzle and the standard answer. We go on to describe in more detail some psychological findings about implicit racial biases, and then illustrate their explanatory value for addressing social science's race puzzle.

21.4.1. Social Construction, the Institutional Approach to Racism and the Race Puzzle

Although there is no single canonical statement of *institutional*—or, alternatively, *structural*—approaches to racism, accounts that go under that name have a common orientation. Here is a typical description:

A “structural racism” approach considers the ways in which the networked operations between historical legacies, individuals, and institutional arrangements produce unequal and hierarchical racial outcomes. Thus, rather than understanding racism as an isolated or individual phenomenon, a structural racism approach understands it as an outcome and suggests that different societal institutions work together to distribute or limit opportunity along racial lines.⁴

Several features of this statement deserved to be unpacked. First, this approach uses a conception of racism that is *outcome* focused. Intuitively, discrete actions, attitudes, and individual people can be racist, but this approach focuses primarily on unequal social level outcomes. In addition to this distinctive way of conceiving racism itself, institutional approaches typically favor a distinctive, anti-individualist kind of explanation of those disparate outcomes as well. The sources and persistence of such inequalities are best explained not by appeal to the characteristics of individual people (including their psychological characteristics), but mainly by appeal to the institutions, social structures and policies of the society in which individual people live, and the policies that govern them. For many advocates of the institutional approach, the details about individuals and their psychological makeup are of minor explanatory value, if of any at all. Because racism (in the form of unequal outcomes) can exist and thrive even in the absence of racists (individual people who evaluatively rank racial groups), institutional approaches to racism countenance the possibility of racism without racists (for discussion, see Arthur 2007; Berard 2008; Brown et al. 2003).

Like our own approach, institutional approaches provide a version of the standard answer to explaining racial difference. They disavow biological explanations, and instead explain, for example, racial inequality by appeal to features of cultures, policies, conventions, and institutions—an approach we have unpacked in terms of social roles (section 21.1). However, institutional approaches also exhibit resistance to psychological explanation with which we disagree. In this case, the reluctance to engage with psychological research appears to stem from an anti-individualist strain. Indeed, some who favor institutional approaches to racism explicitly argue that understanding racial cognition is irrelevant to a proper understanding of racism, and to the most promising strategies for dealing with it (Wellman 2007).⁵ This sort of institutional approach also suggests rather straightforward predictions about how to correct or ameliorate the forms of outcome-based racism it focuses on: Rather than directly targeting individual behaviors or attitudes, the institutional orientation suggests making higher level changes to the structure of the institutions and the governing policies themselves.

In what follows, we will make our case that standard answer approaches focusing on institutions need not be hostile to psychological research, and that relaxing one's commitment to anti-individualism, and taking account of the types of psychological proclivities that influence racial evaluations, allows for a more complete and explanatorily powerful application of the standard answer to racial difference.

21.4.2. Brief Overview of Implicit Racial Bias

For roughly the last twenty years, social psychologists have been developing more sophisticated, indirect ways of measuring individuals' attitudes, biases, and other mental states (Devine 1989; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Fazio et al., 1995.) To say these methods are indirect is to say that they do not simply use introspection and self-report, but instead rely on performance on tests or tasks relevant to the types of mental states under investigation. Many of the most well known and widely used indirect tests, such as the implicit attitude test, or IAT, are sorting tasks, in which subjects must classify stimuli like words or faces as quickly as possible, and under a variety of conditions. Such methods, designed to bypass the difficulties associated with self-deception, lack of sincerity, or problematic introspective access, are often used in conjunction with more direct measures, such as surveys in which participants simply answer questions or rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with a relevant statement.⁶ These methods have been used to gather an enormous amount of data, and shed light on the workings of implicit and automatic cognition in a number of different domains. Of the mental states investigated using such indirect techniques, some of the most well known have come to be called implicit biases. As noted above, social psychologists have found evidence of a variety of implicit biases. These include: biases against the elderly (Levy and Banaji, 2002), biases associated with gender (Lemm and Banaji, 1999), biases associated with sexuality (Banse, Seise, and Zerbes 2001), biases associated with weight (Schwartz et al. 2006), biases against the disabled, as well as biases against religious groups (see Lane et al. 2007

for a review). Some of the earliest discovered, and most well confirmed, are implicit racial biases.

The literature on implicit biases is large and growing, so instead of attempting to give a comprehensive review, we will confine our discussion to some the most relevant and stable lessons that can be drawn from this research project. Perhaps the most striking thing about implicit biases, including racial biases, is that they can coexist within a single individual, with explicit attitudes that are *prima facie* incompatible with them. A single person can explicitly embrace anti-racist doctrines and can loudly and sincerely profess to hold egalitarian and tolerant racial views, on the one hand, while still harboring implicit biases against members of certain races, on the other. Though they are about the same groups of people (in this case races), racial evaluation appears to involve two distinct types of mental states, each processed by its own distinct kind of cognitive mechanism.

In addition to being distinct from their explicit counterparts, implicit biases have a number of surprising features (much of this, and the evidence in support of it, is reviewed in greater detail in Kelly, Machery, and Mallon 2010b). Implicit biases appear to be easy to acquire, and are difficult to get rid of once acquired. As revealed by a number of studies, some utilizing several indirect techniques, these biases are unconscious and difficult to detect via introspection. Despite this, however, implicit biases are far from causally inert. Indeed, they have been found to influence evaluations of people who are classified as belonging to a particular race, and, in turn, have been found to influence interactions with members of that same race. Even for those who become aware of implicit racial biases, and the fact that they themselves harbor them, those implicit biases do not appear to be easily or straightforwardly manageable. Indeed, a wide range of strategies for mitigating the influence of implicit racial biases have and continue to be investigated, and while it is not yet clear what separates out those that have some degree of success from those that do not—or those that outright backfire—it appears that consciously attempting to suppress their influence on thought and behavior provides an incomplete and only sometimes effective solution (also see Kelly, Faucher, and Machery 2010a for discussion).

21.4.3. Explanatory Benefits

Implicit racial biases can be thought of as features of individual psychologies that, as such, exert influence on individuals occupying the racial social roles that are in part constituted by racial representations. We maintain that collectively, the influence of implicit biases can scale up to shape the types of population regularities that social sciences attempt to capture with generalizations about race in particular societies, cultures, and institutions. In what follows we will go over a specific example in some detail in an attempt to illustrate how this might work.

We may first note that what we will be proposing there is not completely without precedent. For example, Haney-Lopez (2000) advocates a form of institutional explanation of racism that he calls the “New Institutional” approach. His concern is with racial outcomes at the level of prosecution and conviction of certain crimes.

He finds that for the trials he is looking at, the defendants were Mexican Americans, but the juries contained little or no Mexican Americans. He argues that the outcome of those trials is in part explained by appeal to the racial composition of the juries. He further argues that the racial composition of those juries, in turn, is in part explained by appeal to a form of racism, more specifically racial discrimination on the part of the judges who selected the relevant juries.

Haney-Lopez's discussion is particularly useful from our point of view for a pair of reasons. First, it represents an attempt to expand the institutional approach to racism so that it can take into account characteristics of individual actors—particularly actors who occupy important “gatekeeper” roles within the context of their institutions, and who are therefore in position to exert more amplified influence over institutional outcomes. Perhaps more importantly, however, is his sensitivity to the psychological subtleties involved. The judges relevant to his explanation explicitly claim, under oath, to not harbor any conscious or intentional discriminatory intent. He sees this as compatible with his favored explanation, which appeals to discrimination on the part of the judges who selected the juries. Indeed, his stated goal is to

elaborate a theory of racism capable of reconciling the statistical evidence of judicial discrimination with the judges' insistence that they never intended to discriminate. More generally, it sets out to build a theory of racism that explains organizational activity that systematically harms minority groups even though the decision-making individuals lack any conscious discriminatory intent. (Haney-Lopez 2000, 1717)

We need only to point out that the research on implicit biases provides a wealth of empirical support for the kind of psychological possibility required by Haney-Lopez's explanation—that actors can be explicitly unbiased but implicitly biased. Thus, incorporating the findings of empirical work on racial cognition is not only compatible with institutional approaches to racism, but can substantially enrich the associated explanations of racial regularities and outcomes.

Finally, however, it is worth reflecting on how appreciation of the nature of implicit biases might help understand certain components of racial representations themselves. More specifically, appeal to implicit biases may help explain some of the evaluative, rather than purely descriptive, content that racial representations can take on.⁷ If this line of thought is on target, then it supplies one more way in which a parallel constructionist account of race and racism is at best incomplete; important elements of the evaluative components of racial representations are a product of psychological proclivities—in this case the implicit biases—of the classifiers.

Racial disparities in employment provide another area in which social scientific explanations can be usefully enriched by appeal to implicit racial biases. Consider the study performed by Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003), who sent out over 5,000 resumes in response to help wanted ads in Boston and Chicago for a range of different types of jobs. Each of the resumes was made up. Some resumes were designed to be highly qualified for the position they were sent in response to, while others were not. Finally, each resume was given either a very black sounding name or a very white sounding name.

The results were eye-opening. First, the resumes with white sounding names got roughly 50 percent more callbacks in general. Second, within the set of resumes with white sounding names, those that were highly qualified for the respective position received 30 percent more callbacks than others, but no similar effect was found for resumes with black sounding names. Being more qualified did not increase the chance that a resume with a black sounding name would get an interview. Third, the relative levels of discrimination were similar across occupations and industries. Finally, just less than one third of those companies explicitly described themselves as “Equal Opportunity Employers” in their help wanted ads. Despite this assertion, these companies showed similar patterns and levels of discrimination against resumes with black sounding names.

Bertrand and Mullainathan are at pains to show that the discrimination revealed by this study is a result of race, and not some other factor. They show that the patterns cannot be explained by appeal to the address listed on the resume (whether the applicant lives in a good or bad neighborhood) or facts about the different types of job requirements or industries associated with the positions being applied to.

Before discussing this in terms of the social science’s race puzzle, we need to make the case that these patterns of discrimination are caused, in part, by the implicit racial biases of people making decisions about individual resumes. This, of course, requires some speculation, but we believe the claim is plausible. Bertrand and Mullainathan show that the discriminatory patterns are linked to race, as indicated by the names on the resumes. This leaves two possibilities: Either the people deciding which resumes deserve callback and which that do not are explicitly racist, or they harbor implicit racial biases that influence their decisions. We believe the later explanation is more plausible. First, implicit racial biases are relatively widespread, and research has demonstrated that implicit biases can influence the judgments and behaviors of individuals in a number of ways, and in a number of conditions (Lane et al. 2007). So they are able to do the explanatory work being asked for them. Second, it seems to us that implicit, rather than explicit biases are more likely to be the culprits in this case. In general explicit racial biases have been on the decline in the population for some time (Schuman et al. 1997). Furthermore, Bertrand and Mullainathan found similar patterns of discrimination in those businesses that went out of their way to describe themselves as Equal Opportunity Employers. This means that, collectively, those individuals making decisions about resumes in Equal Opportunity businesses produced patterns of racial discrimination despite having instructions and incentives to assess resumes impartially.

Now, let us recall the race puzzle: If biological races offer no explanatory purchase, then what explains the success of racial categories in expressing the types of true generalizations studied by the social sciences? If there are no biological races of the sort once thought, then why are there robust population level statistical regularities that are captured using racial terminology? What we called the standard answer claims that racial categories are social roles that are invented, but then take on a life of their own once they become involved in the looping effects of human classificatory dynamics. Our discussion here accepts this as far as it goes, but we think that it

leaves out an important piece of the puzzle: namely, the influence of specific features of individual psychologies on those classificatory dynamics, and the types of patterns those features can generate and sustain.

We think Bertrand and Mullainathan's resume study finds a pattern that illustrates just this phenomenon: Resumes with white sounding names are 50 percent more likely to get interviews than resumes with black sounding names. Explaining this, we claim, involves not just appeal to explicit beliefs about race, but also appeal to the fact that, at the individual level, many people have implicit racial biases that tacitly influence their judgments about those categories and the people that fall under them. The effects of these biases, in turn, scale up to help produce the types of population level patterns discovered by social scientists, such as the disparity in interviews offered to resumes bearing black versus white sounding names. In general, such biases can contribute to the types of disparities in employment documented by social scientists and others working on race (for instance see Horton 1995; Bendick and Egan 2009; Bendick, Rodriguez, and Jayaraman 2009).

Race may not be biologically real, but it remains important because people think it is, and act as if it was, thus keeping racial categories and social roles in high currency. Racism remains very real, in part because the cognitive machinery that underpins how people think about and act on racial social roles involves implicit biases, and the influence of those biases scales up to systematically shape population levels patterns concerning race and discrimination.

21.5. PSYCHOLOGICALLY CONSTRAINED SOCIAL ROLES, AND THE POWER OF SMALL CAUSES

Social sciences' race puzzle arises from the assumption that there is no or little biological basis of race, which leaves it unclear why racial categories can serve as a successful basis of informative, important social scientific generalizations. As we have argued, the standard answer to this puzzle is a social constructionist explanation of racial difference, invoking something like racial social roles. While we agree with this answer, we have argued that the exploration and development of more sophisticated forms of the standard answer have been hindered by anti-psychological bias manifested in two related strands of thought, which we have called *parallel constructionist* and *anti-individualist*, respectively. Instead, we have argued that versions of the standard answer can be supplemented and improved by taking account of the types of psychological findings we have discussed in the last two sections.

Let us sum up the argument we have been offering. Standard answer explanations of category difference appeal (tacitly or otherwise) to the way representations structure our social lives, an idea we have sketched in terms of social roles. Any plausible account of these representations and the ways they structure our social

lives will appeal to psychological entities and processes that can guide practices of classification, influence social conventions, and shape formal and informal policies concerning membership in a social role.

Parallel constructionists see these representations as themselves being socially constructed, and thus exclusively the product of human decision and culture. As such, parallel constructionists see the social roles they structure as primarily a result of historical circumstances, social conventions and common practices of classification. Anti-individualists see social regularities and outcomes as best explained by appeal to features of institutions and social policies, rather than individuals. Both explanations exhibit anti-psychological bias.

Another way to think of this is that both parallel constructionist and anti-individualist explanations deal in what might be called *purely conventional* social roles. Some social roles, such as *divorcee* or *licensed chihuahua owner*, may very well be purely conventional, in this sense. We have offered reason to believe, however, that others are what we can call *psychologically constrained* social roles. To say that a social role is psychologically constrained is to say more than the (fairly trivial claim that) relevant representations are, at some point, operated on or mediated by individual human psychologies. It is rather to claim that social roles are strongly influenced, in some way or another, by the specific character of the psychological mechanisms in play.

Understood in these terms, the case we have been making in the last couple of sections is that the behavior of the racial social roles invoked by the standard answer is best understood as psychologically constrained in a number of ways. To make this case, we have tried to show that explaining the stability and distinctiveness of racial social roles, and explaining the evaluations associated with and the causal effects of those social roles requires a better appreciation of the specific character of the psychological mechanisms that contribute to and constrain them.^{8,9}

One might suspect that the types of psychological influences that we claim can constrain social roles are too small to actually shape population level regularities. However, intuition is not always the best guide to understanding how factors that are slight, even at the level of the individual, will aggregate upward to affect the character of a population, especially when those factors are widespread. Indeed, the power of micro-affirmations and micro-inequalities is beginning to be discussed and better appreciated by those attempting to understand the sources of persistent population level disparities associated with gender (Rowe 2008; also see Saul manuscript). Theorists of culture, attempting to understand the engines and dynamics of cultural change and stability more generally, make a similar point: “Small, dull effects at the individual level are the stuff of powerful forces of evolution at the level of populations” (Richerson and Boyd 2005, 123). In the types of (psychologically-constrained-social-role) cases we’re talking about, some of those small, dull effects are generated by features of individual psychologies and the psychological mechanisms they contain. That said, we see no reason that their being *psychological* would make them an exception to the rule that when such effects are slight but many, they can aggregate upward to have powerful effects at the level of populations, either as

forces of change or as forces that help maintain certain aspects of the status quo. The best explanations of many population level generalities, outcomes, and disparities, then, may very be found in psychologically constrained social roles.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Our thanks go out to Luc Faucher, Jennifer Saul, Emma Gilby, Harold Kincaid, and the participants in the Current Issues in the Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences conference at the University of Alabama at Birmingham for providing useful feedback on previous versions of this material.

NOTES

1. We are indebted to Root (2000)'s articulation of this problem.
2. In the philosophy of race, widespread endorsement of the failure of biological race as a referent for racial thought and talk has given rise to a debate over whether we should retain or eliminate racial categories like "black," "white," "Asian," and "race" itself from our ordinary, expert, and policy discourse. While much of this discourse has been, at least on the surface, guided by semantic assumptions—for example, assumptions about the conditions under which terms like "race" would refer—there are substantial practical questions about the relative value and costs of racial classification also in play (Mallon 2006, 2007).
3. David Lewis (1969) introduced the idea of common knowledge. Cf. Vanderschraaf and Sillari (2009) for an extensive discussion of a range of ways of specifying the idea.
4. Available online from The Ohio State University's Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at www.structuralracism.org/publications/documents/SRC%20SR%20Bibliography_No%20annotations.pdf.
5. Wellman even goes a step further, arguing that certain psychological explanations of racism actually inhibit efforts to deal with it. See Machery, Faucher, and Kelly 2010 for discussion and rebuttal of those arguments.
6. Descriptions of indirect testing methods, and the statistical techniques used to interpret data gathered using them, can get quite technical (see citations in main text, and also Lane et al. 2007 and Greenwald et al. 2009). One can get a visceral feel for such tests by taking an IAT online at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>.
7. One useful way of thinking about this is in terms of the philosopher Bernard Williams's (1985) distinction between *thick* and *thin* ethical concepts. Thin concepts are purely evaluative, and often quite abstract; examples include *good*, *justice*, *wrong*, etc. Thick concepts, on the other hand, are hybrid concepts, in that they contain both descriptive and evaluative elements; example here include *courageous*, *compassionate*, *brutal* and *untrustworthy*. Certainly in some cultures, racial terms seem to operate like "thick" concepts; they not only purport to pick out a group of people based on some description, but also carry an attendant evaluation of that group of people as well.

8. Compare with the notion of “multidisciplinary explanations” of racism discussed in Machery, Faucher, and Kelly 2010.

9. Psychologically constrained social roles could be appealing in areas of philosophy and social science beyond discussions of race though the burden of this chapter has been to make the case that *racial* social roles in particular are constrained in a number of interesting and perhaps unexpected ways.

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