Free Speech Union briefing

Unconscious Bias Training: Social Lubricant or Snake Oil?

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This briefing discusses some important questions about Implicit Association Testing and Unconscious Bias Training:

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Implicit Association Testing and Unconscious Bias Training

1. What is the Implicit Association Test?

The Implicit Association Test (IAT) is a psychological tool that claims to measure 'implicit bias'. The test was introduced by psychologists Anthony Greenwald, Mahzarin Banaji, and Brian Nosek in 1998.[1]

The race IAT is the best known and the one described here. It claims to measure implicit bias, or unconscious prejudice, between racial groups.

2. What is the significance of the Implicit Association Test?

At the launch of the test, the creators of the IAT stated that they had discovered that 90-95% of IAT participants show an 'implicit preference' for white over black faces, including a significant number of black participants.[2] In the terms of the test, this means that they are faster to associate good words with white faces compared to black faces, and slower to associate bad words with white faces compared to black faces.

Individuals who hold egalitarian beliefs about race are frequently shocked that the test appears to reveal racial prejudices they were not conscious of.

The creators of the IAT have argued that the results explain the persistence of racial disparities in a society where explicitly racist attitudes and behaviours have declined. The apparent preference for white faces over black is taken as evidence that racist attitudes are being perpetuated unconsciously, even by well-meaning people who regard themselves as supporters of racial equality.[3]

It was initially stated that the IAT could predict discriminatory behaviour at the individual level, suggesting that people with a high IAT score were more likely to behave in racially prejudiced ways. Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald stated that:

'[T]he automatic White preference expressed on the Race IAT is now established as signalling discriminatory behavior. It predicts discriminatory behavior even among research participants who earnestly (and, we believe, honestly) espouse egalitarian beliefs.'[4]

The test's creators suggested that implicit bias influenced important real-world outcomes, such as whether white police officers were more likely to shoot at black suspects.[5] This narrative was enthusiastically taken up and replicated by the media, even though there was little evidence to support it at the time.[6]

A second generation of research has cast considerable doubt on the initial claims made about the IAT and its validity as a psychological tool is questionable.[7] The creators of the IAT have modified some of their earlier claims.[8] The test has proved a very poor predictor of real-world behaviour, discrediting their initial assertion that IAT scores can determine an individual's propensity to behave in racially prejudiced ways. Nonetheless, the narrative of unconscious, implicit racial prejudice as a major driver of real-world racial inequality has become commonplace.

3. How does Implicit Association Testing work?

In practice, the IAT takes place on a computer across the following four rounds:

1. To begin with, participants are asked to hit 'I' on the keyboard when a positive word shows on screen and 'E' when a negative word shows.

2. Next, participants are prompted to hit 'I' when they see a black African face and 'E' when they see a white European face.

3. In the third-round participants must press 'I' for a good word *or* a black face and 'E' for a bad word *or* a white face.

4. In the last round, this is reversed so that participants press 'I' for a bad word *or* a black face and 'E' for a good word *or* a white face.[9]

The IAT calculates your reaction speed when associating concepts (positive or negative words) and attributes (black or white faces).[10] In other words, the race IAT is measuring how fast or slow you are to associate positive or negative words with different racial groups.

The IAT feeds reaction times into an algorithm that categorises participants as having either a 'slight,' 'moderate' or 'strong' preference for white faces over black or vice versa. So a 'strong preference' for white faces would be regarded as evidence of high levels of implicit anti-black bias. The test can also show no preference.[11]

4. Is the IAT a valid psychological test?

Psychological tests must meet certain scientific standards in order to be considered legitimate and useful. The IAT falls well short of these standards in three key areas: reliability, validity and objectivity.[12] Realistically, this calls into question the test's ability to accurately measure implicit racial bias. Jussim *et al.* summarise this shortcoming as follows:

> 'There are many scientific gaps in understanding the IAT: it has dubious construct validity and low test-retest reliability; it is subject to various other psychometric oddities; its bias effect has often been computed in a way that appears to exaggerate its size; it has been almost universally misinterpreted and misrepresented as measuring "implicit bias" when, by Greenwald's (2017) own definition, it does not do so. Its predictive validity has often been found to be modest and is, at best, controversial. Even if we ignore all that, its ability to account for inequality in the present is likely to be limited.'[13]

You can read more about whether it is ethical to use the findings of a discredited psychological test in the context of workplace Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) here.

Reliability: Test-retest reliability describes whether a given measure reliably produces the same results over multiple tests. A test which produces different results every time it is taken has low test-retest reliability and one which produces the same results every time has high test-retest reliability.[14] Science reporter Jesse Signal elaborates:

> 'A tape measure has high test-retest reliability because if you measure someone's height, wait two weeks, and measure it again, you'll get very similar results. The measurement procedure of grabbing an ice cube from your freezer and seeing how many ice cubes tall your friend is would have much lower test-retest reliability, because different ice cubes might be of different sizes; it's easier to make errors when counting how many ice cubes tall your friend is.'[15]

The IAT is well below the threshold of acceptable reliability for a psychological test. Participants often get very different scores when they take the test multiple times.[16] This means the IAT is not a reliable psychological measure, calling into question its use in real world environments.

Validity: Validity describes how well a test measures what it claims to be measuring. A psychological test with high validity should accurately predict related behaviours.[17] For example, a depression test that consistently diagnosed people without depression as depressive would have low validity because it would clearly be measuring something other than depression.

The IAT claims to measure unconscious racial prejudice but, as you can read here and here, there is considerable doubt that this is in fact what it is measuring. This suggests that the IAT has poor validity as a psychological test.[18]

Objectivity: The findings of a psychological test should reflect the objective properties of what is being tested for, not the subjective values of the tester.[19] The findings of the IAT are particularly vulnerable to politicised interpretation which decreases validity.[20]

The IAT algorithm classifies rates of reaction speed as evidence of slight, moderate or strong implicit bias according to thresholds set by the creators of the test. These thresholds were not determined by real world behaviours objectively observed to be shared by participants with similar IAT scores. Rather, they reflect subjective judgements by the test's creators about the significance of differences in reaction times when associating concepts (positive or negative words) and attributes (black or white faces).

We can best understand the impact of this on the IAT's objectivity as a psychological test by examining changes made to the algorithm thresholds by the test's creators. One such change caused a 20% drop in participants registering a strong anti-black bias. The IAT's creators have never adequately explained their reasons for altering the algorithm or precisely why it was changed but in the words of Mitchell and Tetlock:

> 'This change… was not due to a sudden societal shift, nor due to the findings of any studies linking particular bands of IAT scores to particular behaviors. This change was due solely to the researchers' change in definitions.'

A psychological test that is so heavily influenced by the subjective values of its creators has questionable validity. To quote Mitchell and Tetlock again, when someone gets an IAT score indicating strong anti-black implicit bias:

> 'All that really means is that the test-taker's relative reaction times, as measured in milliseconds, were above a threshold arbitrarily set by the test designers (i.e., the bias label is shorthand for reaction time differences – it is not shorthand for bias on anything other than the test.)'[21]

5. Can the Implicit Association Test really measure unconscious prejudice?

Several factors cast doubt on the claim that the IAT is measuring something that can be defined as unconscious.

The difference between conscious (explicit) and unconscious (implicit) thought is unclear: There is no consensus in psychology and neuroscience about precisely how explicit and implicit thoughts are divided from each other. Luvell Anderson describes it this way:

> 'A lot of habits we have work like muscle memory; we do them automatically without thinking about it explicitly. But it's not necessarily clear to me that those habits are unconscious in any deep or significant way.'[22]

This suggests that the IAT is claiming to measure something (unconscious/implicit thought) that it is presently impossible to define.[23]

IAT participants can predict their score: IAT participants can often predict how implicitly biased the test will find them to be.[24] This means that participants show conscious awareness of something that the IAT claims to be unconscious.

Explicit measures are as accurate as implicit ones: Explicit self-report measures of racial prejudice ask participants to rank their agreement with statements like 'Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights.' Self-report is regarded as a poor measure of someone's actual views because participants can choose to answer in a way that doesn't reflect their true beliefs. The IAT was hailed as a revolutionary tool of psychological analysis in part because it claimed to overcome this difficulty and reveal participant's hidden attitudes.[25] However, meta-analysis shows that the IAT is no better at predicting racist behaviour than explicit self-report measures.

This again suggests that the IAT is not measuring something that can be defined as unconscious in any meaningful way.[26]

6. Is the Implicit Association Test really measuring implicit bias against racial groups?

It's important to make clear that our behaviour *is* influenced by associations we are not consciously aware of. However, we do not yet know how to accurately define or measure unconscious associations, or what they signify. Additionally, human beings *do* demonstrate in-group favouritism, even when in-groups are defined entirely arbitrarily.[27] But again, there is no consensus about what this signifies. Even if we accept that the IAT is measuring implicit thought, the idea that this signifies unrecognised racial prejudice is not universally accepted or well evidenced.[28]

Before continuing, it is worth reiterating that the IAT performs very poorly in terms of validity, reliability and objectivity, as described here. To quote Jesse Signal's summary: 'The IAT falls far short of the quality-control standards normally expected of psychological instruments.'[29] It is entirely legitimate to question the ability of the IAT to measure *any* psychological phenomenon, including implicit racial bias.

That being said, some of the theories about what the IAT may really be measuring are described below.

Reaction Times: Fundamentally, the IAT is a reaction speed test. Are differences in reaction time evidence of implicit racial prejudice? As Jussim *et al.* put it, 'Difference in reaction times is not discrimination.'[30]

Cognitive Ability: Because the IAT equates speed at completing a cognitive task with low levels of implicit bias, participants with slower cognitive processing speeds will be categorised as having high levels of unconscious racial prejudice. People who are good at tasks like crosswords puzzles or video games and consequently have faster cognitive processing speeds, may be scored as having lower levels of implicit bias for this reason alone. Cognitive processing speed declines with age, meaning that IAT scores may vary simply according to how old participants are.[31]

Additionally, a participant can alter their IAT score by completing the test more slowly or quickly and it is possible to improve your score just by practising.[32]

In effect, rather than testing your level of implicit racial bias, the IAT may simply be measuring how good you are at completing cognitive tasks like the IAT.

Stereotype or Base Rate Familiarity: It has been suggested that the IAT may measure familiarity with cultural stereotypes or averages, sometimes called 'base rates.' Studies show that base rates have a considerable impact on IAT scores.[33] This means that someone may be faster to associate negative concepts with racial attributes simply because they are familiar with the base rate of racist stereotypes in wider society. This says nothing about whether a participant believes such stereotypes to be accurate or justifiable. Jussim *et al.* explain:

> 'defining associations of concepts in memory as 'bias' imports a subterranean assumption that there is something wrong with those associations in the absence of empirical evidence demonstrating wrongness.'[34]

Out-group Empathy: A similar theory finds that the IAT may measure empathy for members of victimized groups. This means that a participant who profoundly disagrees with racist stereotypes may be faster to associate negative words with black faces precisely because they feel empathy with victims of racial inequality. The IAT may falsely interpret awareness of and opposition to racism as evidence of implicit racial prejudice.[35] This could explain the surprising fact that the IAT finds a quarter of black participants to have anti-black implicit bias. This theory is explored in an article by Arkes and Tetlock entitled 'Would Jesse Jackson Fail the Implicit Association Test?'[36] Stereotype familiarity and out-group empathy are sometimes called the Association Model of implicit bias.[37]

Context: IAT scores appear to be highly context dependant. Contextual factors are sometimes called the Propositional Model of implicit bias.[38] This means people get different scores depending on the context in which the test is administered and explained to them.[39] For example, one IAT study communicated to participants that the faces they would be shown during the test were of churchgoers. Instead of the usual finding that a majority of participants showed anti-black implicit bias, the results showed no detectable bias towards either race.[40]

The impact of context on IAT results was creatively demonstrated in a study by Uhlmann, Brescoll and Paluck. The researchers invented two fictional races, Noffians and Fasites. Research participants were divided into two

groups: one group was told that the Noffians were privileged and the Fasites were oppressed and another was told the opposite. Participants then took a race IAT where black and white faces were exchanged for Noffians and Fasites. Both groups were faster to associate negative words with the fictional race they had been told was oppressed.[41] Jesse Signal comments:

> 'the experimenters were able to easily induce what the IAT would interpret as "implicit bias" against Noffians simply by forming an association between them and downtroddenness in general.'[42]

The fact that IAT scores are heavily affected by the context in which the test is taken, and the values communicated to the participants casts doubt on the theory that the IAT measures implicit racial bias on an individual level. In the words of Mitchell, the IAT may actually be measuring 'properties of the task or the environment rather than attributes of test-takers'.[43] As explained here, this may be particularly relevant to the use of implicit association testing in the context of unconscious bias training.

7. Does a high IAT score mean someone is racist?

Simply put, no. A high IAT score does not mean someone is more likely to be racist in real life.[44] As one researcher puts it:

> '[a]n individual who supposedly shows high implicit bias on the IAT is no more likely to discriminate in any given situation than an individual who supposedly shows low implicit bias on the IAT.'[45]

Which begs the question: where has the commonly held belief that the IAT can predict racism come from? The premature claims of the test's creators and favourable media coverage have both contributed to this misconception.[46] This is in spite of the fact that the IAT's creators have publicly stated that the test should not be employed to predict an individual's level of racial prejudice.[47]

The IAT does not predict real-world behaviour: As we would expect of a psychological test that has poor reliability, validity and objectivity, IAT scores correlate too poorly with real world outcomes to predict individual behaviour. On average, participants scored as having strong anti-black implicit bias are no more likely to be racist than participants scored as having low anti-black implicit bias.[48] If the IAT measures 'implicit racism' but this does not give rise to racist behaviour and attitudes, how meaningful is a high IAT score? As Jesse Singal puts it:

> 'Can a bias be a bias if it only exists in the context of a very specific
> test result, but never bubbles out into the real world?'[49]

Simply asking someone their views is a more accurate measure of individual racial prejudice than the IAT: The IAT has been found to be no more effective at predicting racist behaviour than explicit, self-report measures.[50] If you are trying to find out whether a given individual is racist, research suggests that simply asking them their views on race would be more informative than checking their IAT score.

8. What is Unconscious Bias Training and how does it relate to the Implicit Association Test?

Unconscious Bias Training (UBT) is also known as Anti-Bias or Implicit Bias Training. Anti-Racism Training is a highly ideological form of UBT described [here](#).

The creators of the IAT initially claimed that widespread implicit bias was responsible for the remaining disparities in outcome between racial groups. They stated that:

> [G]iven the relatively small proportion of people who are overtly
> prejudiced and how clearly it is established that automatic race
> preference predicts discrimination, it is reasonable to conclude not
> only that implicit bias is a cause of Black disadvantage but also
> that it plausibly plays a greater role than does explicit bias in
> explaining the discrimination that contributes to Black disadvantage.'[51]

As we have discussed, there is little evidence to support the assertion that 'automatic race preference predicts discrimination' (discussed [here](#)) or that implicit prejudices play a more significant role in discrimination than explicit ones (discussed [here](#)).

Nonetheless, informed by this understanding UBT identifies implicit bias as contributing to ongoing racial inequality. UBT aims to train people to recognise and reduce their levels of implicit bias. Taking an IAT is sometimes, but not always, part of UBT.

9. Is Unconscious Bias Training ideologically motivated?

UBT varies considerably by provider. Some trainings are heavily influenced by ideological beliefs and questionable science. Others are less ideologically motivated and are less reliant on implicit bias as a scientific concept.

Critical Race Theory: The belief that implicit, unconscious prejudice is a driver of modern racial inequality is central to the controversial academic discipline of critical race theory (CRT). You can read more about CRT here. Robin DiAngelo, a leading CRT scholar, has been described as 'the… most visible expert in anti-bias training'.[52] Anti-Racism Training is a specific type of UBT incorporating the ideas of CRT and often relies on contested concepts of 'whiteness,' 'privilege,' 'oppression' and 'white fragility'. UBT that is heavily influenced by the disputed ideas of CRT can be highly ideological in nature, but not all UBT incorporates CRT.

UBT is a profitable industry: The UBT industry earns tens of billions of dollars a year[53] and leading anti-bias trainers like Robin DiAngelo charge as much as $20,000 per session.[54] UBT has been successfully marketed as a way for employers to meet their obligations under the Equality Act 2020 and create more welcoming and racially diverse work environments. UBT has become common place in many organisations. But as is explained here, there is no evidence to suggest that UBT is effective in making workplaces more racially diverse, and some evidence that it is actively counterproductive. It is worth acknowledging that companies marketing UBT may be financially motivated to promote the view that reducing implicit bias is a valid and effective approach to diversity.

Lack of expertise: UBT instructors are generally not trained in psychological science, although they often advertise their courses as supported by scientific evidence. They are frequently unaware of the second generation of IAT research, which discredited the test's initial findings about racial prejudice. Some claim that the validity of the IAT is irrelevant to the utility of UBT. Instead, their trainings emphasise the importance of understanding in-group favouritism and the effect of implicit associations on decision making more generally. Many UBT providers sincerely believe that reducing implicit bias is a valid approach to building a better society. This should be recognised and respected as a valid ideological belief, but other people should not come under pressure to endorse it if it is in conflict with their own principled beliefs.

10. How does Unconscious Bias Training work?

This section explores some of the common themes in UBT, but training is offered by many different providers and will vary accordingly. You can find links to articles about people's experiences of UBT here.

Introducing the concept of Implicit Bias: UBT commonly introduces the concept of implicit bias as an invisible process of thought. According to UBT, this unconscious thought process constantly impacts our behaviour, perpetuating prejudice without our conscious awareness. Fatalistic, subjective assertions like, 'We are all biased. We can't help it' are often presented as undisputable facts.

Based on an unsupported claim – that unconscious prejudice effects important real-world events[55] – UBT frequently identifies implicit bias as a major unrecognised factor in workplace discrimination. UBT often states that it is essential for businesses to reduce implicit bias in order to be diverse and welcoming to minorities. You can read more about the validity of this claim here.

Awareness raising: UBT's central technique for reducing implicit bias is awareness raising. Participants are told that they have a responsibility to work at recognising implicit bias and must actively compensate for its influence at all times. You can read more about the impact of cultivating this state of hyper-awareness in the workplace here and its validity as a means of reducing implicit bias here.

Perception is suspect: Many people are sceptical of the idea that our behaviour is largely controlled by unconscious influences. Our justice system assigns responsibility according to intent and we are not used to excusing prejudiced behaviour on the basis of uncontrollable subconscious impulses. Discrimination is usually recognised as a conscious decision indicative of poor character, and we hold individuals accountable for choosing to behave in prejudiced ways.

UBT may try to address this scepticism by claiming that human perception is inherently inaccurate. Some trainings use optical illusions as evidence that our brains sometimes perceive things incorrectly. However, as discussed here and here, there is a considerable difference between recognising that our minds associate concepts in memory, sometimes inaccurately, and the value judgement that this signifies implicit racial prejudice.

Establishing positionality: Anti-Racism Training or UBT heavily influenced by Critical Race Theory may employ variations on an exercise called the 'Privilege Walk'. This aims to demonstrate the invisible forces of 'privilege' and 'oppression' that CRT identifies as the dominant powers in society. In the context of UBT, it could be thought of as a visual representation of

participants' levels of perceived implicit bias and an effort to achieve the core aim of awareness raising described here.[56]

Participants form a line in the middle of the room all facing in one direction. Statements like the following are read out:

- If you went to university take one step forward.

- If you come from a broken home take one step backward.

- If you have experienced discrimination on the basis of your race take one step backward.

- If your parents were white collar professionals take one step forward.

You can read a more complete list here.

By the end of the exercise people CRT identifies as 'privileged' will be standing on one side of the room and people identified as 'oppressed' will be on the other. The division often appears to reflect the racial disparities we see in society more broadly.

In highly ideological Anti-Racism Training there may be a very clear attribution of virtue to the 'oppressed' group and wrongdoing to the 'privileged' group, regardless of the intentions or experiences of the individuals concerned. These characterisations may exacerbate divisive thinking and cause resentment, as described here. A black participant who has overcome adversity may justifiably resent being labelled 'oppressed'. Equally, a white participant labelled 'privileged' may feel that this minimises their own experiences of adversity. In both cases, the statements used in exercises like the Privilege Walk attempt to divide people into homogenous identity categories that usually fail to reflect the diverse experiences and views of the individuals composing them.

This process is sometimes referred to as 'establishing positionality' in Critical Social Justice literature. Anti-Racism Training may ask participants to reflect deeply on their positionality, identify times when they benefited from 'privilege' at the expense of inflicting 'oppression' on marginalised groups and, in extreme cases, require 'privileged' participants to apologise to those identified as 'oppressed', ostensibly to reduce levels of implicit racial prejudice.[57] It is important to note that not all UBT incorporates these controversial ideas.

Questioning your biases: UBT often sets participants self-reflection questions like:

– Do you believe you judge people based on their physical appearance?

– Do you like to think of yourself as a fair person?

Of course, most people try not to judge others on their physical appearance and like to think of themselves as fair. While it is important to reflect on ways to avoid unnecessary rudeness or insensitivity, in many ways these are trick questions.

If a participant says they are a fair person who doesn't judge others on their appearance, then they are not recognising that they are implicitly biased in the way that UBT dictates. In the terms of UBT, they risk unconsciously perpetuating prejudice by refusing to acknowledge their implicit bias.

On the other hand, if a participant says they are *not* a fair person who *does* judge others based on their appearance then they are following the model of UBT correctly, even if they have just outed themselves as an explicitly prejudiced person. In this case, addressing the participant's openly expressed bigotry would appear to be more important than interrogating his unconscious attitudes.

The true role of self-reflection questions like these in UBT is to remind participants that implicit bias is omnipresent and perpetuates prejudice regardless of our consciously held intentions.

Stereotypes: UBT typically involves a discussion of what stereotypes are and how they can contribute to discrimination. UBT often positions implicit bias as a factor in creating negative stereotypes and argues that discriminatory behaviour is linked to unconscious acceptance of stereotypical beliefs. Some UBT explains the concepts of in and out-group empathy.
This is one of the less controversial areas of UBT. Belief in and explicit endorsement of racially prejudiced stereotypes are reliable indicators of racist behaviour (see here). However, as discussed here, the extent to which this is a result of implicit or unconscious thought is uncertain. Additionally, there is some evidence that UBT may reinforce racial stereotypes, as described here.

Microaggressions: UBT sometimes claims that implicit bias can manifest in the workplace in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions have been defined as:

'brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color'.[58]

In the context of UBT, microaggressions are usually characterised as unconscious behaviours that demonstrate the presence of unrecognised implicit prejudice.

Examples of microaggressions range from actions widely recognised as insensitive or impolite (like demanding to know where someone is 'really from') to more subjective interactions that are arguably open to interpretation (like complimenting a black person on their eloquence).[59] This list of microaggressions contains examples from both extremes of the spectrum.

The degree of significance attached to microaggressions varies considerably between UBT providers and some trainings do not mention microaggressions at all. Anti-Racism Training or UBT marketed by advocates of CRT is likely to place greater ideological emphasis on microaggressions.

Taking the IAT: Some UBT asks participants to sit an IAT. As we have discussed here, the IAT is poorly regarded as a psychological test. However, in UBT it is used to highlight to participants the supposed omnipresence of implicit bias and to encourage them to recognise that they have prejudices they are not consciously aware of.

Techniques for reducing implicit bias: UBT advises participants to interrogate their intuitive assumptions for evidence of implicit bias before making decisions. Some trainings recommend techniques for slowing down your thought process to facilitate this. You can read about the validity of implicit bias reduction techniques here. But, as explained here, the central technique recommended by UBT is to cultivate perpetual awareness of your unconscious prejudice by continually scrutinising your thought process for evidence of its existence.

Accepting Feedback: Some UBT also encourages participants to call out perceived expressions of implicit bias in colleagues, which is sometimes referred to as being an 'ethical bystander'. This is arguably given more emphasis in UBT influenced by Critical Race Theory.

In this context, UBT sometimes advises participants that they must accept 'feedback' on their implicit prejudices entirely uncritically. Denying an

accusation of implicit bias is sometimes regarded as refusing to acknowledge your role in unconsciously perpetuating prejudice. If UBT is heavily influenced by the ideology of CRT, this may be combined with the view that members of identity groups seen as 'privileged' are not entitled to question the experiences of 'oppressed' identity groups, or their perception of whether a particular incident was motivated by subconscious prejudice. Doing so may be labelled 'gaslighting' and identified as perpetuating oppressive systems of power.

Ironically, this view was epitomised by the reaction of IAT creator Mahzarin Banaji when Jesse Singal asked her about the growing evidence that the IAT is not a valid psychological test. She claimed that the implicit bias paradigm is only criticised by:

> 'a small group of aggrieved individuals who think that Black people have it easy in American society and that the IAT work might make their lives easier'.

In other words, it is Banaji's view that the concept of implicit bias is only criticised by racists.[60] This kind of circular reasoning is extremely common in Anti-Racism Training and UBT informed by Critical Race Theory and is sometimes referred to as 'Kafka trapping'.

Bias spotting exercises: UBT often concludes with an exercise where participants are asked to spot implicit bias in workplace interactions. In examples such as choosing between candidates for a job or putting ideas forward at a meeting, participants must identify where implicit bias is presumed to be causing discriminatory outcomes.

11. Does Unconscious Bias Training reduce implicit prejudice and racial discrimination at work?

There is little evidence suggesting that it does and, worryingly, some indication that UBT may increase division and hinder effective communication in the workplace. It is legitimate to question whether UBT represents a worthwhile investment for organisations genuinely seeking to reduce racial discrimination.

Implicit bias appears to explain only a fraction of discriminatory behaviour: The most generous studies find that implicit bias, as it is understood in the context of IAT and UBT, accounts for about 4% of discriminatory behaviour in lab settings. Under meta-analysis this figure

falls to 1%.[61] Even if we accept that implicit bias is a factor in racial discrimination, it does not account for between 96-99% of observable prejudice. UBT therefore appears to be an inefficient target of intervention for employers seeking to reduce racial discrimination.[62]

Targeting implicit attitudes is ineffective: UBT is of course heavily premised on the idea that reducing levels of implicit bias is a vital way for organisations to measurably reduce the impact of racial prejudice. If it were true that businesses could reduce racism by employing UBT there would be a strong case for its use in the workplace. Unfortunately, 'Robust data is lacking for many of these interventions'[63] according to Fitzgerald.

The poor reliability of the IAT, explained here, makes it hard to establish if a reduction in implicit bias signifies a change in an individual's implicit beliefs, or is simply a reflection of the test's poor test-retest reliability. Additionally, the small number of studies demonstrating that it is possible to change levels of implicit bias show that reductions are minimal, short term and do not lead to a reduction in real-world discriminatory behaviour.[64] Forscher summarises his meta-analysis of unconscious bias reduction techniques as follows: 'Based on the evidence that is currently available I'd say that we cannot claim that implicit bias is a useful target of intervention.'[65]

Racial disparities persist in companies who have invested in UBT: Racial disparities continue to be evident in organisations where UBT has been deployed, discrediting the core claim that training in implicit bias creates diverse workplaces. Firms like Pinterest and Google have made huge investments in UBT and related diversity initiatives, but society wide patterns of unequal racial representation continue to be reflected in the makeup of their workforces.[66] This may be a consequence of the fact that implicit bias, and by extension the UBT that aims to reduce it, is found to be such a small factor in real world discriminatory behaviour, as described here.

Targeting implicit bias may distract from addressing other causes of prejudice: As pointed out by Jesse Singal, explicit racial prejudice, openly expressed through pejorative racial stereotypes, is often found in organisations where racial discrimination is a problem. He gives the example of Ferguson police department. Following the police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black man, federal investigators found that:

'Ferguson's harmful court and police practices are due, at least in part, to *intentional* discrimination, as demonstrated by direct

> evidence of racial bias and stereotyping about African Americans by certain Ferguson police and municipal court officials.'

Singal goes on to suggest that focusing on invisible, implicit prejudice as advocated by boosters of UBT may distract from frankly confronting explicitly racist behaviour. Science reporter Olivia Goldhill further theorises that blaming implicit impulses for racially prejudiced behaviour risks minimising the responsibility of individuals to behave in ethical ways.[67]

The IAT's creators have distanced themselves from bias reduction techniques like UBT: Anthony Greenwald, one of the IAT's creators, summarises his view of implicit bias reduction techniques like UBT starkly: 'There is no scientific support for usefulness of these techniques.'[68] He lists the following strategies, all commonly taught by UBT providers, as wholly ineffective in reducing implicit bias:

- 'making people aware that they have implicit biases or that implicit biases are pervasive in the population'

- 'encouraging people to have a strong intention not to allow themselves to be biased'

- '"thinking slow" or pausing before making decisions'

Greenwald instead argues for the importance of practical measures like anonymous application processes and blind evaluations in tackling workplace discrimination.[69] It is significant that even Greenwald, an originator of the implicit bias framework, believes UBT is ineffective and that explicit discrimination is a more useful target of intervention.

UBT may increase conflict and racial division in teams: Some evidence suggests that the IAT and diversity training may have 'negative effects' on the workplace.

One study paired aboriginal participants with white participants to complete a task. Beforehand, partners were assigned to groups that either explicitly self-reported their views about race, completed a non-race IAT or an IAT relating to aboriginal people. Aboriginal participants who had taken a race IAT 'reported feeling less valued by their white partners as compared to aboriginals in all of the other groups'. The study's author states that: 'if completing the IAT enhances caution and inhibition, reduces self-efficacy, or primes categorical thinking, the test may instead have negative effects.'[70]

Further, after studying UBT at over 800 companies, sociologists Dobbin and Kalev concluded that the training damaged diversity, created resentment and heightened racial stereotyping.[71] In a similar finding, one study found that 'White privilege lessons may increase beliefs that poor White people have failed to take advantage of their racial privilege – leading to negative social evaluations' and commented that 'these shifts in sympathy were associated with greater punishment/blame'.[72]

Without wishing to overemphasise the significance of single studies, evidence that measures of implicit bias are strongly context dependant (explained here) seem to align with these findings. It's possible that implicit bias testing and UBT primes participants to see themselves in divisive, racialised terms. The artificial consciousness and perpetual state of hyper-awareness cultivated by UBT, described here, may in some sense create and entrench the bias it claims to combat.

Accounts of Unconscious Bias Training

'White Fragility is everywhere. But does anti-racism training work?'

 'The dangers of unconscious bias training'

'Why diversity training on campus is likely to disappoint.'

'Racial sensitivity training turned me into a confused racist.'

Endnotes

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