My Culture Made Me Do It

Lay Theories of Responsibility for Automatic Prejudice

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Abstract. The present research examined the effects of egocentric motivations on individuals' explanations for how their automatic racial prejudices came into being. The majority of participants reported experiencing biased thoughts, feelings, and gut reactions toward minorities which they found difficult to consciously control, and they attributed such biases to cultural socialization. Of particular interest, ego-threatened participants were significantly more likely to attribute their automatic racial biases to their culture and significantly less likely to attribute such biases to themselves. Results suggest that attributing one's racial biases to cultural socialization can be a defensive, motivated process aimed at diminishing personal responsibility.

Keywords: judgments of responsibility, motivated reasoning, self-affirmation theory, attributional ambiguity, cultural socialization, automaticity, prejudice, stereotyping

Some years ago one of the authors was flipping through a copy of the *New Haven Register* and came across a photo of a couple of men loitering on a street corner. The first, an African American man, held a plastic bag filled with some illicit substance, and the second, a Hispanic man, smiled at the camera through a mouthful of gold teeth. He glanced down at the caption, mildly curious as to what these two hoodlums had been arrested for. The caption read: "They Deliver: Desmond Bent, left, of Connecticut Job Corps and Ray Vasquez of the Community Action Agency deliver meals to the residents of Imperial Apartments Friday in New Haven."

At first, the author was very upset about his embarrassing misinterpretation of the photo. How self-contradictory and hypocritical for a researcher of stereotyping and prejudice to engage in stereotyping and prejudice! However, he soon comforted himself by drawing on his scientific knowledge regarding the cultural roots of contemporary racial bias. He considered the fact that such biases are often unconsciously ingrained by the social environment, activated spontaneously in the presence of members of the targeted group, and influence subsequent judgment and behavior despite one's best intentions (Banaji, 2001; Bargh, 1999; Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Devine, 1989; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Wilson & Brekke, 1994; Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). A person who has been repeatedly exposed to negative cultural stereotypes about Black people can develop a strong association between "Black people" and "criminals." Upon subsequently encountering a photo of a Black man in the newspaper, it might spontaneously occur to that person that the Black man is a criminal. This reaction could occur even if one deliberatively rejects the cultural stereotype of Black criminality. After applying the social cognitive approach to cultural stereotyping to better understand his situation, the author felt much better: What a relief it was to discover that mistaking minority volunteers for criminals was the culture's fault and not his!

The present research examined people's perceptions of their automatic racial biases and their explanations for how such prejudices came about. Of interest was whether everyday people employ the same self-serving cultural attributions the author used to explain away his racist interpretation of the photo. Such a phenomenon seems likely to be found in the literature on self-enhancing biases. A mathematically impossible percentage of people view themselves as above average on positive characteristics such as leadership ability, intelligence, and social skills (Alicke & Govorun, 2005). Decision-makers are also unrealistically optimistic about their future life outcomes (Armor & Taylor, 1998), have difficulty adopting the perspectives of others (Epley, Morewedge, & Keysar, 2004), falsely believe they are constantly the center of attention (Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001), take credit for their personal successes but not their failures (Schlenker & Miller, 1977), and exhibit extremely positive self-evaluations on indirect and implicit measures of self-esteem (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000; Nuttin, 1985).

Further, when people's sense of self-worth is threatened, they act to restore the integrity of the self using whatever means are available, such as engaging in biased information processing to defend their values (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000) and defining positive traits in self-serving ways (Dunning & Cohen, 1992; Dunning, Leuenberger, &

Sherman, 1995). For instance, Dunning et al. (1995) found that individuals who had just received negative feedback on a test were more likely to define criteria of excellence that placed their own idiosyncratic traits in a positive light. We examined whether cultural attributions for racial biases are likewise motivated by egocentric concerns.

Such motivated reasoning is facilitated by attributional ambiguity. For example, decision-makers are more likely to see themselves as far above average on positive characteristics (e.g., athletic ability) when such characteristics are undefined and ambiguous. When athletic ability is defined a priori by someone else, individuals are unable to define athleticism in a self-serving way and are therefore less likely to view themselves in an unrealistically positive manner along that dimension (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; see also Gilovich, 1990). Also, when Black participants believe White evaluators are aware of their race, their self-esteem is unaffected by negative performance evaluations (Crocker & Major, 1989). Thus, in situations in which negative outcomes can potentially be attributed to prejudice (creating ambiguity regarding whether the poor outcome is deserved or due to racial bias), motivated attributions protect the self-esteem of members of stigmatized groups (Crocker & Major, 1989; Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Our argument is that attributing one's own prejudice to cultural socialization (rendering it ambiguous whether the person or culture is ultimately responsible) likewise protects the self-esteem of those who discriminate.

Pilot Studies

An initial question was the extent to which White Americans perceive themselves as harboring negative feelings toward Black people which are difficult to control consciously. The effects of egocentric motivations on cultural attributions for automatic prejudice are relevant only if people actually see themselves as harboring such biases. Although some research highlights lack of awareness as a component of automatic racial prejudice (Banaji, 2001; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), there is also evidence that people subjectively experience some manifestations of their racial biases (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Monteith & Voils, 1998). Because such thoughts and feelings are an intimate component of people's private experiences, they may be less blind to such biases (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002). Indeed, in our first pilot study 75% of 106 White participants agreed that they experienced spontaneous prejudiced thoughts, feelings and reactions (see Appendix A).

We further explored the extent to which people tend to blame their culture for their prejudices. Because negative feelings toward Black people are socialized (Banaji, 2001; Bargh, 1999; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), people are aware of negative cultural stereotypes about Black people (Devine, 1989; Nosek & Hansen, 2008), and self-enhancing biases lead them to avoid per-

sonal responsibility for negative outcomes (Schlenker & Miller, 1977), cultural attributions for prejudice may be quite common. Notably, such attributions are to a certain extent warranted given that the cultural context is an important cause of social stereotypes and prejudices. In a second pilot study, the majority of the 74 White participants believed that if they did have stereotypical thoughts, this would occur because of how their culture had socialized them (see Appendix B). Self-perceived automatic prejudice correlated positively with cultural attributions. Thus, the more participants perceived themselves as automatically prejudiced, the more likely they were to attribute their biases to cultural socialization. Many people appear to experience spontaneous negative thoughts and feelings toward minorities which they find difficult to consciously control, and attribute such thoughts to their cultural context.

Primary Study

Our main interest, however, was motivational influences on people's explanations for their prejudices. Notably, the reasons why people attribute their racial biases to their culture is a separate issue from whether such attributions are accurate or inaccurate. People can arrive at incorrect conclusions despite sound reasoning, and correct conclusions can be based on irrational motives. That individuals make the potentially valid attribution that their racial biases are caused by their culture does not mean that a valid reasoning process led to that conclusion. For instance, the reasoning may have been biased by a desire to protect the self from the ego-threatening conclusion of being a racist (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). People can distance themselves from responsibility for their biases by capitalizing on attributional ambiguity (Snyder et al., 1979) and explaining their prejudices based on an external cause like cultural conditioning (Weiner, 1996). Cultural explanations locate the cause externally as opposed to internally, diminishing a sense of personal responsibility (Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1996). Moreover, the potential validity of cultural attributions may make them especially useful fodder for ego-protective motivated reasoning (Dunning et al., 1995; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987; Steele, 1988).

Our primary experiment tested an effect of egocentric motivations on cultural attributions using an affirmation-threat manipulation (Cohen et al., 2000; Steele, 1988). We first primed people's knowledge of their racial biases using the discrepancy activation paradigm developed by Devine, Monteith and their colleagues (Devine et al., 1991; Monteith & Voils, 1998). Participants were asked about the extent to which they would and should exhibit various negative responses toward Black Americans. Prior work demonstrates that most people report discrepancies between how they would behave toward minorities and how they

feel they should behave. For instance, some people report that they would cross the street to avoid a Black man, but at the same time believe that such behaviors are inappropriate (Monteith & Voils, 1998).

Subsequently, participants in the *ego threat condition* wrote about a time when they failed to live up to a personally important value unrelated to stereotyping and prejudice (Cohen et al., 2000). Participants in the *affirmation condition* wrote about a time when they succeeded in living up to such a value. We hypothesized that ego-threatened participants would be more likely than affirmed participants to attribute their racial biases to their culture, demonstrating motivational influences on such attributions.

Method

Participants

A group of 49 White undergraduates completed the study in return for course credit at the University of Virginia.

Materials and Procedure

Self-Discrepancies Prime

Participants first completed a shortened version of the Monteith and Voils (1998) self-discrepancy measure. The items included were: "I should [would] laugh at jokes that play on stereotypes of minorities," "I should [would] think that a Black student was only admitted to this university due to affirmative action," and "I should [would] think 'why don't they get a job?' when I see some Black men on a street corner." Participants responded to both the "should" and "would" versions of these statements on Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Affirmation/Threat

Next, in an ostensibly unrelated "values survey," participants were asked to indicate which of 11 values or characteristics was most personally important to them: artistic skills/appreciation, sense of humor, relations with friends/family, living life in the moment, social skills, athletics, musical ability/appreciation, physical attractiveness, creativity, business/managerial skills, and romantic values. Participants in the threat condition were then asked: "Please write about a time when you failed to live up to your #1 value or characteristic. Focus on expressing your memory of the event and the feelings that you had at the time." In the affirmation condition, participants were asked to write about a time that they succeeded in living up to their #1 value or characteristic. This is a standard manipu-

lation of threat/affirmation (Cohen et al., 2000; Steele, 1988).

Attributions for Prejudice

All participants then responded to cultural and personal attribution items. These items were "My stereotypical or prejudiced thoughts are a product of the culture I live in," "My stereotypical or prejudiced thoughts are a product of my own mind," and "My stereotypical or prejudiced thoughts are a product of my own choosing." Responses to these questions were given on 7-point Likert scales anchored at 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 7 (*strongly agree*). Finally, participants indicated their sex, which did not moderate the reported results.

Results

Participants were more likely to agree that they would engage in racially biased responses than that they should. This was true of the ethnic jokes items ($d = 2.48$), the affirmative action stereotyping items ($d = 2.60$), and the laziness stereotyping items ($d = 1.55$), all ps < .001. Only two participants did not report should-would discrepancies in the expected direction (both claimed no discrepancy in how they would react to members of minority groups and how they should react to them). Removing these two participants from the analysis had no meaningful effect on the pattern of results or significance levels reported below.

Our primary interest was the effect of threatening vs. affirming participants' sense of self-worth on their perceptions of their racial biases as culturally vs. personally caused. The two personal attribution items ("My stereotypical or prejudiced thoughts are a product of my own mind" and "My stereotypical or prejudiced thoughts are a product of my own choosing") were significantly correlated, $r(48) = .62$, $p < .001$, and were averaged together. Cultural and personal attributions were not significantly related, $r(48) = -.06$, $p = .66$, and were therefore analyzed separately.

As seen in Figure 1, a significant interaction emerged between threat-affirmation condition and person vs. culture attributions, $F(1, 47) = 9.93$, $p = .003$. Participants in the threat condition were significantly more likely than participants in the affirmation condition to perceive their prejudiced thoughts as due to their culture (Ms = 5.50 and 4.67, SDs = 0.91 and 1.64, respectively), $t(47) = 2.12$, $p = .039$, $d = .62$, and significantly less likely to attribute their racial biases to themselves (Ms = 3.39 and 4.28, SDs = 1.26 and 1.46, respectively), $t(47) = 2.26$, $p = .028$, $d = .66$. These results support the hypothesis that cultural attributions are influenced by a desire to maintain a positive view of the self. Participants who were dealt a blow to their ego were significantly more likely to attribute their racial biases to
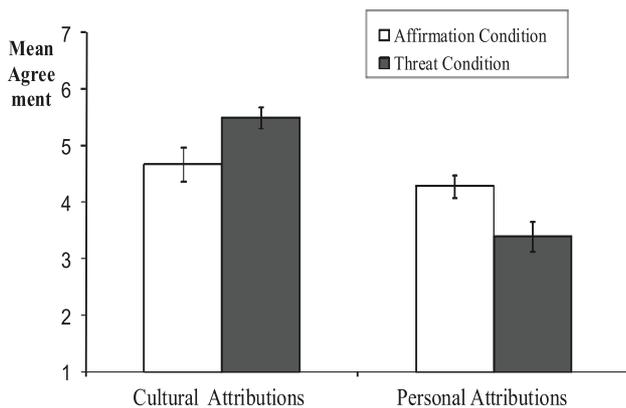
Figure 1. Participants' cultural and personal attributions for their racial biases depending on whether they had just experienced ego-affirmation or an ego-threat. Higher numbers reflect relatively greater endorsement of the attribution. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

their culture, and significantly less likely to identify themselves as the source of their bias.

Discussion

A majority of participants self-reported experiencing spontaneous negative feelings, thoughts, and reactions toward minorities which they found difficult to prevent. Consistent with the view that prejudices are socially conditioned (Banaji, 2001; Bargh, 1999; Devine, 1989; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), most of our participants attributed their biased thoughts and feelings to their cultural context. Laypeople are generally aware of negative cultural attitudes toward minorities (Devine, 1989; Nosek & Hansen, 2008); thus socialization provides a ready explanation for their prejudices.

Of primary interest were motivational influences on cultural attributions for racial bias. Again, whether such attributions are factually accurate is a separate issue from why people explain their stereotypes and prejudices in terms of their culture. The results indicate that one such reason is ego-protection. Participants who wrote about an ego-threatening experience were more likely to make cultural attributions for their racial biases than participants who wrote about an affirming experience. Although these results are qualified by the absence of a neutral control condition, they do demonstrate that high levels of egocentric motivation (as in the ego threat condition) relative to low levels of egocentric motivation (as in the affirmation condition) can cause individuals to attribute their racial biases to their culture. Future research should examine whether changes in such attributions are driven more by ego-threatening or ego-affirming experiences.

Of course, that egocentric motivations can influence cultural attributions for prejudice does not necessarily mean

they in fact always do – or act to the exclusion of other factors and motivations. The present results simply demonstrate that one reason cultural attributions occur is because they put a causal and psychological distance between the self and socially undesirable biases. For instance, a psychologist who mistakes minority volunteers delivering food to the elderly for street thugs can draw on the literature on the socialization of stereotypes to help himself feel better after the error. Lay automaticity theorists appear to make similar use of cultural attributions to distance themselves from the less savory aspects of their social attitudes.

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Appendix A

Pilot Study 1

In our first pilot study, 106 White undergraduates completed an anonymous survey assessing both self-perceived automatic prejudice and modern racism (MRS; McConahey, Hardee, & Batts, 1981; $\alpha = .64$). Participants responded to all items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The self-perceived automatic prejudice items were: "Although I don't necessarily agree with them, I sometimes have prejudiced feelings (like gut reactions or spontaneous thoughts) that I don't feel I can prevent," "At times stereotypical thoughts about minorities come into my head without my necessarily intending them to," "When I see a member of a minority group on the street, no automatic prejudiced feelings or stereotypical thoughts occur to me (reverse-coded)," and "Sometimes I get prejudiced feelings (like gut reactions or spontaneous thoughts) that I don't feel I can control" ($\alpha = .78$). These were selected from a larger group of items developed by Uhlmann and Cunningham (2000) to assess self-perceived automatic prejudice. Each question was designed such that endorsement reflected (1) meta-cognitive awareness of the relevant feelings, thoughts and reactions, (2) the belief that such responses are prejudiced, and (3) the subjective experience of the responses as spontaneous and difficult to control.

Participants expressed overall agreement to the self-perceived automatic prejudice items ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.26$, scale midpoint = 4). A one-sample *t*-test comparing participants' mean score of 4.57 against the neutral scale midpoint of 4 revealed a significant difference, $t(105) = 4.63$, $p < .001$. Overall, 75% of participants agreed that they experienced spontaneous prejudiced thoughts, feelings, and reactions toward minorities (i.e., responded above the neutral scale midpoint of 4 to the self-perceived automatic prejudice items). Participants were significantly less likely to agree to the MRS items ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.15$) than to the self-perceived automatic prejudice items, $t(100) = 13.07$, $p < .001$, and only 6% showed overall agreement with the MRS items. There was no significant correlation between modern racism scores and self-perceived automatic prejudice, $r(105) = .10$, $p = .32$.

Notably, some of our self-perceived automatic prejudice items have potential for multiple ways of disagreeing with them (double-barreling). For example, someone could disagree with the item beginning "Although I don't necessarily agree with them" to indicate that (1) they never have prejudiced gut reactions, or (2) that they actually agree with their prejudiced thoughts. Our interpretations depend on disagreement being a function of (1) not (2). Because participants in this pilot study reported very nonprejudiced feelings on the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay et al., 1981), it seems more likely they experienced unwanted prejudiced gut reactions than that they explicitly agreed with their prejudiced reactions.

Appendix B

Pilot Study 2

In our second pilot study, 74 White undergraduates completed the self-perceived automatic prejudice items and an item assessing cultural attributions for prejudice ("If I have stereotypical thoughts about minorities, it's because of how my culture has socialized me.") Participants responded to all items on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The majority of participants (60%) believed that if they were to have stereotypical thoughts, this would occur because of how their culture had socialized them. In other words, 60% of participants responded above the neutral midpoint of 4 to the cultural attributions item. A one-sample *t*-test comparing participants' mean score of 4.42 ($SD = 1.84$) against the neutral scale midpoint of 4 revealed a significant difference, $t(71) = 1.93$, $p = .05$. Self-perceived automatic prejudice correlated positively with cultural attributions, $r(73) = .31$, $p = .007$. The more participants perceived themselves as automatically prejudiced, the more likely they were to attribute their biases to their culture.