

## **Intent and Ordinary Bias: Unintended Thought and Social Motivation Create Casual Prejudice**

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*Social psychologists have addressed stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination for nearly a century. Everyday prejudices first seemed to lodge in abnormal personalities, pathological bigots who were exceptional (“bad apples”), but Freudian explanations proved inadequate. Purely cognitive explanations took their place, arguing that bias inevitably results from normal processes of categorization and association, often automatic. But this so-called cognitive miser account denies the role of intent, which does influence the activation and use of stereotypes and prejudices. People are more realistically “motivated tacticians” who display more cognitive bias under particular social motivations. The author’s continuum of impression formation, proceeding from initial categorization to possible moderation by motives, illustrates this view. Plausible social motives include belonging, understanding, controlling, self-enhancing, and trusting, all known to influence ordinary bias. Social neuroscience is beginning to show that motivation and cognition mix at the earliest stages of ordinary bias.*

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Twenty-some years ago, the latest new thing in psychology was the cognitive revolution. All the important social phenomena that we as a field had been busy blaming on motivation turned out, aha!, to be equally or better explained by cold cognition. Bigotry, thought to be the purview of a few maladjusted misfits with bad parents, turned out to be well within the reach of normal cognitive processes. Group dysfunction, thought to stem from primitive psychodynamic forces, turned out to be explained by faulty information processing. Attitude change, thought to result from the motivational discomfort engendered by dissonance, turned out to be a function of how hard people think about messages they receive. Egocentric arrogance, thought to result from self-esteem defense, turned out to be merely a

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myopic memory bias. Of course, I paint with a broad, inaccurate brush here (see Fiske, 2004, for a more nuanced portrait), but these caricatures capture the flavor of that historical moment when everyone, it seemed, was pushing purely cognitive explanations for all of people's triumphs and foibles, focusing on the mind rather than the heart. The unabashedly mentalistic models served as a corrective to sovereign theories of motivation (authoritarian personalities, group psychodynamics, drive reduction, egoistic self-protection). But, like most revolutions, we went too far and repeated the excesses of our parents, just in the opposite (cognitive) camp.

Into this exciting if arrogant enterprise came a few doubting voices, many of them from people studying stigma and prejudice, a prominent venue for social psychologists obsessed with fairness. This line of work serves as a case study in thesis, antithesis, and from where we are now, what myopically appears to be a synthesis. To be provocative, one might propose an antisynthesis. But first, to the point and counterpoint. A similar argument could be constructed in other domains, notably group interaction, persuasion, or self-enhancement, but the sequence in prejudice research illustrates the progress of our insights into the complex causality of ordinary human behavior.

The specific message for the ethics of ordinary social behavior will be that *we cannot blame unethical behavior on a few bad apples*: bigoted outcasts, small groups lacking adequate impulse control, hypocrites pretending to act always on their values, or narcissists motivated to gloss over their disturbing lapses (the original thesis). *Nor, ultimately, can we blame unethical behavior on faulty but morally neutral programming of the human information-processor*, although some of us seemed to argue this, from the barricades of the cognitive revolution (the cognitive antithesis). We cannot afford to ignore motivation. *Unethical behavior, bias in particular, depends on both motivation and cognition*, of course (the current synthesis). But now we are on the verge of claiming *it is all wired in the brain in set of systems* undifferentiated by "cognition" and "motivation" (the new antisynthesis?). But, first, the background story.

### THESIS: ABNORMAL MOTIVATION

The setting, post World War II American universities. The problem, accounting for unspeakable evil. The intellectual climate, Freudian. Social-personality psychologists (Adorno *et al.*, 1950) explained prejudice as a function of authoritarian personalities. The starting observation was that prejudices run in packs: People who hate Jews also hate Blacks and homosexuals, and they aren't too fond of uppity women. Such widespread hatreds suggest a personality syndrome, which suggests early origins in an individual's developmental history. Apparently, some parents anxious for their children to improve their socioeconomic status therefore raise those children with vigilance as a keyword. Vigilant to the danger of the child's bad impulses—especially Freudian sexuality, dirtiness, and aggression—the strict,

punitive, dominating parents aim to raise obedient, conforming, submissive, and respectful children. The child's unacceptable impulses become unconsciously projected onto allegedly hypersexual, dirty, aggressive outgroups. Like the parents, authorities and one's own country are idealized. Adult authoritarians were described as unusually ethnocentric, blindly submitting to authority, strictly adhering to middle-class conventions, aggressive against deviance, and thinking in rigid categories. The fading of this approach came from methodological problems (biased measures) and theoretical excesses (Freudian ideas falling into disfavor). The field thus started by blaming prejudice on a few bigots viewed as outsiders (e.g., working class or Germanic chauvinists) with low tolerance for ambiguity or variety.

The exceptions, the bad apples, also provide the starting point for most everyday analyses of prejudice. In many analyses, even now, unethical behavior in general is often explained, at first, as the purview of a disfavored few (consider whatever corporate scandals are current in today's headlines). These explanations view corruption, injustice, and narcissism as coming from a few sick people with abnormal predispositions. Unfortunately for this comfortable account that isolates the problem in a few bad individuals, the accumulated evidence suggests that most of us are perfectly capable of behaving badly, in the relevant context.

### ANTITHESIS: NORMAL COGNITION

Allport (1954) started it. Although he did a brilliant job of describing the psychodynamics of the prejudiced personality, he is remembered for his genius in defending the inevitability of social categorization and the normality of prejudice. Twenty years later, the metaphor of the mind as information-processor took root as social psychologists relied solely on cognition as a sufficient explanation for intergroup bias (not to mention groupthink, persuasion, and self-enhancement). In intergroup and interpersonal perception, people categorize others on the basis of salient cues (notably race, gender, age), recruit associated stereotypes, trigger emotional prejudices, and launch discriminatory behavior.

To Allport's simple, elegant emphasis on categorization, modern research added automaticity, when psychology's cognitive revolution spilled over to social psychologists studying social cognition and, in particular, stereotyping. Normal cognition became the culprit. In broad outline (see Fiske, 1998, for more detail), people automatically categorize and stereotype. A variety of implicit, subtle, rapid measures indicate these processes. For example, people confuse women with other women or Blacks with other Blacks (Taylor *et al.*, 1978), providing evidence of immediate categorization by gender and race (and other meaningful social categories; Fiske, 1998). As another example, a variety of rapid *yes-no* judgments (Is *x* a word? Could a person ever be *x*? Is *x* good or bad?) revealed patterns favoring people's own groups (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986). That is, when first primed with *us*, people respond faster to positive words (e.g., *intelligent* is a word,

can apply to people, or is good) than when primed with *them*. The same pattern holds for replacing *us* and *them* with specific ingroup–outgroup primes, such as *white* and *black*.

These apparently automatic patterns were not limited to a few exceptional bigots. Soon, researchers identified knowledge of cultural stereotypes, along with their automatic effects, as effectively universal, although dissociated from more thoughtful, conscious endorsement of them (Devine, 1989). Automatic responses soon became a viable unobtrusive measure of at least implicit racial attitudes (Fazio *et al.*, 1995). Automatic, unconscious priming predicted even stereotypic behavior (Bargh *et al.*, 1996). Soon, implicit responses became the measure of choice for prejudice (Greenwald *et al.*, 2002; Greenwald and Banaji, 1995).

Unconscious (or semiconscious) cognition has the advantage of revealing biases not accessible to survey approaches. Explicit, verbal norms changed dramatically over the twentieth century, as much as 60–80%, from explicit rejection of minorities in voting, housing, schools, and jobs, to overwhelming acceptance, at least in opinion polls. This change however operates more in principle than in practice (Bobo, 2001). And it was the continuing evidence of modern, ambivalent, subtle, aversive racism (Fiske, 1998) that lent credence to the implicit, automatic measures that respondents could not monitor.

Thus, the cognitive approach has had major advantages. For example, one can work with ordinary college students as research participants and demonstrate essentially universal biases. Despite our best intentions, all people are (modern, subtle, implicit, aversive, automatic, unexamined) racists, sexists, and ageists. As a field, we have uncovered some startling results (Dasgupta, 2004; Rudman, 2004). We began to tell our students and other lay people, “Prejudice is more widespread and automatic than you think.”

Plaintiffs’ lawyers in discrimination cases liked this categorization approach because the expert witness could explain how normal social cognitive processes account for bias, illustrate this social framework with examples from the verbal record (a plaintiff dismissed as a “lady partner candidate,” “token black,” or “old dog”), and let the judge or jury decide. Unlike the earlier Freudian framework, the expert did not have to psychoanalyze the few bad apples. Instead, normal human proclivities were responsible.

The problem was that the cold cognitive account seemed morally neutral, depressingly inevitable, and ultimately hopeless. If everyone is biased, then who’s to blame? If normal cognition accounts for unethical prejudices, whatever can we do about it? Several of us worried publicly about this. “Contemporary cognitive approaches to stereotyping . . . [project] a rather weary fatalism” (Jones *et al.*, 1984, p. 300) about this “rather depressing dilemma” (Hamilton, 1979, p. 80). I reported the following nightmare:

After testifying for the plaintiff in a case of egregious and demonstrable discrimination, a cognitive social psychologist faces the cross-examining attorney. The hostile

attorney, who looms larger than Goliath, says, "Tells us, Professor, do people intend to discriminate?" . . . When pressed . . . the psychologist reluctantly mumbles that a common interpretation of the cognitive approach is that people do not stereotype intentionally, whereupon the cross-examining attorney says in a tone of triumph, "No further questions, Your Honor." (Fiske, 1989, p. 254).

Given that intent is a key building block in an argument of unlawful discrimination, a lack of intent could make virtually anyone blameless for unthinking bigotry. As I went on to argue, the common misinterpretation of cognitive accounts as denying intent turns out to matter because a lack of intent often implies a lack of responsibility. The current guest editors credit me with foresight, but like all of us, I was trying to solve an intellectually and pragmatically vexing problem that bothered me. Let me elaborate my own earlier approach to this dilemma.

Seeking potential solutions, my own response examined some lay, legal, and psychological perspectives on intent (Fiske, 1989). In brief, that analysis concluded that intent in general (a) requires having a perceived choice, (b) is especially obvious when people make the harder of two choices, and (c) operates via sustained attention to the chosen alternative. This analysis can extend to any ethical dilemma, including whether to rely on one's handy stereotypes. Take each factor in turn:

People demonstrably can (a) choose the immediately gratifying impulse (stereotype and exclude the outgroup) or the harder, less pleasant, but more ethical alternative (decide on the objective merits). It began to dawn on us that although prejudices can operate automatically and appear ubiquitous at the unconscious level, people clearly do sometimes resist the easy way of automatically responding to the predominant stereotypes.

When people do resist, (b) their intent is especially obvious. That is, when a person follows the default response, the potential for intent is unclear. Could the person have reasonably resisted? The concurrent fact that other people in similar circumstances do resist suggests that the person indeed can help it. People do not have to fall prey to the cognitive imperative. We had not in social psychology explicitly recognized this possibility, at least not yet.

To follow the hard choice of individuation, (c) one must attend to the details of the interpersonal information. The mechanism of resistance is to go beyond the initial, relatively automatic category and learn additional information about the person, but we as a field were not much focusing on that practical, encouraging possibility.

Thus, the overall implication was that people have to pay more attention. But why should they? The meaning of the cognitive categorization and automatic, implicit, rapid stereotyping findings is that people are cognitive misers (Taylor, 1981) who avoid the trouble to think. Enter motivation.

## SYNTHESIS: NORMAL MOTIVATION AND NORMAL COGNITION

Yes, categorization and stereotypic associations are relatively automatic, more so than lay people think. But these processes are less automatic than we psychologists all thought. A variety of motivations can intervene at surprisingly early stages in the process. People are not cognitive misers but motivated tacticians, using pragmatic strategies (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). For example, if people are attentionally overloaded, they may not inevitably activate stereotypes (though under overload they may more easily act on them if they indeed are activated; Gilbert and Hixon, 1991). Attitudes and values matter (e.g., Lepore and Brown, 1997; Moskowitz *et al.*, 1999). Temporary goals matter (e.g., Blair and Banaji, 1996). Both individual differences and immediate context matter (Devine, 2001). In the 1990s, the field began to take up the challenge of showing that people do not have to engage in automatic, implicit prejudice, if sufficiently motivated. The new received wisdom was the interplay of cognition and motivation.

### One Motivation–Cognition Framework

Our own approach (Fiske and Neuberg, 1990) was to propose that people form impressions by a continuum of processes, moderated by information and motivation. The continuum starts with an automatic categorization, often in terms of sex, ethnicity, and age. If the person seems irrelevant, that superficial response (and associated stereotypes) may be—pragmatically—sufficient. If the person is motivationally relevant, people seek additional information. We proposed a series of steps that attempt to preserve the initial category, in the face of that additional information. We proposed that people first attempt to reconfirm the initial category (e.g., an ambiguously gendered person is on closer inspection, indeed male, just atypical). People may also subtype (an artistic gay guy) or relate the person to self (recalling one's own youthful experiments with long hair and earrings). In each case, confirmatory categorization through subtyping, associated stereotypes, affective responses, and discriminatory behaviors likely result. If all levels of categorization fail, then the perceiver is forced to construct a fully individuated impression, using the range of available information. People progress along this continuum of impression formation processes, to the extent they have information and motivation (Fiske *et al.*, 1999). Another dual-process model of impression formation emerged simultaneously with ours (Brewer, 1988), and other dual-process models proliferated in social psychology, to contrast automatic and controlled cognitive processes in a variety of domains (Chaiken and Trope, 1999), all driven by motivation.

Presumably, given the crucial mediating role of motivation, the next step is to understand the system of motives that matter. How to understand the variety of plausible motives; is it endless? In our own work on stereotyping, we have parsed the relevant motives by the structure of a dyadic interaction (Fiske *et al.*, 1999;

Fiske and Neuberg, 1990). If I am potentially stereotyping you, I can think better of it because of something about me (e.g., egalitarian values), something about my relationship to you (e.g., our interdependence), or something outside the dyad (e.g., accountability to a third party who takes a dim view of my biases). But not all ethical dilemmas are dyadic, so a more general framework is needed to systematize the motives likely to matter in ordinary unethical behavior.

### One Parsing of Motives That Matter

Reference to motives that social-personality psychologists have found useful in a variety of everyday contexts suggests a finite generic list, adequate at least for discussion (Fiske, 2003, 2004; Stevens and Fiske, 1995). All five of these motives are rooted in people's adaptation to survive in social groups; people now and throughout human history have survived, thrived, reproduced, and raised children better in the company of others. Ostracism and isolation are demonstrably bad for people's health.

Hence, the first motive useful for predicting ordinary social behavior is *belonging*. Belonging motivates people to conform to group norms, for example, about prejudice or its lack. Certainly, the century's changes in acceptable levels of verbal prejudice at least partly reflect perceived group consensus. And when people perceive the norms to be changing, intergroup contact successfully reduces prejudice (Pettigrew, 1998). People conform to their ingroups, more than to outgroups, because it is the ingroup that determines one's fate. So the core motive to belong both preserves ingroups that foster prejudice against outgroups and provides the means to overcome that bias. In other areas of ordinary unethical behavior, people often stray by going along with the crowd or failing to blow the whistle on their friends. The influence of loyalty to the group is primordial.

To operate effectively, individuals in a group must have shared social *understanding*, and people are highly motivated to make sense of their worlds in ways that fit the group's cognition. Shared understanding motivates people to use quick-and-dirty cultural stereotypes, when those are good-enough for present purposes. But a variety of work including our own indicates that people will also think harder, when the social context requires it (Chaiken and Trope, 1999). In various areas of (un)ethical behavior, the easy impulse may be a socially shared but unethical response (e.g., the ingroup's norm to ignore an inconvenient law) and the hard choice may be relying on one's own considered belief in the importance of strictly law-abiding behavior.

Effective group membership relatedly requires mutual social *controlling*, a predictable contingency between one's actions and one's outcomes. We have found that when people are contingent on other people, they learn more about them, specifically going beyond their stereotypes to know the person as an individual (Fiske, 2000). Thus, controlling motives can make behavior more ethical by making

people think harder. Of course, the motive to have a sense of control can make behavior less ethical if people think harder, only to rationalize their prior belief in the status quo.

Fourth, people are motivated toward *enhancing the self*. This has social survival value (why make an effort to be or help a group member if the self is worthless?). Self-enhancement affects prejudice, in that a good deal of prejudice is demonstrably related to protecting oneself and one's group from antithetical values (Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2001), economic competition (Bobo, 2000), or sheer group dominance (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). People display more prejudice under both personal threat (Fein and Spencer, 1997) and group threat (Kinder and Sears, 1981). Enhancing and protecting the self plays a role in other kinds of unethical behavior, the most simple being illegal or immoral forms of personal gain.

Finally, people have a need for *trusting* others within their ingroup. Trust allows the group to operate more smoothly, and trust facilitates social interactions. Trusting ingroup others makes individuals more successful. Of course, trusting the ingroup means distrusting the outgroup. Changing group boundaries to create crosscutting categories can change the boundaries of trust and reduce prejudice between mutual outgroups (Brewer, 2000; Dovidio *et al.*, 2000).

The main utility of these five (plus or minus five) motivations is heuristic. Each type of motivation demonstrably affects prejudice and discrimination (as well as all of social behavior, ethical and otherwise; Fiske, 2004). The point is not whether there are more or fewer or different motives. Let us not proliferate motives that interact with (un)ethical behaviors. Psychology went down that unprofitable road a century ago. The point is to put a limited variety of motives to systematic work on cognitive processes that matter in social settings. This will further the current synthesis, namely that cognition interacts with motivation to predict ethical and unethical behavior.

### **THE FUTURE ANTISYNTHESIS: NORMAL BRAINS DON'T EVEN SEPARATE COGNITION, AFFECT, AND MOTIVATION**

As the cognition–motivation synthesis becomes in time the new, well-established thesis about ordinary social behavior, after researchers have fully documented its plausibility, what can possibly undermine such a reasonable perspective? One possibility is to show the limits of motivational control (Moore and Loewenstein, 2004).

Another possibility might seem, at first, to take the automatic or at least implicit reactions a step further back in the chain of response, to demonstrate their basis in primitive areas of the brain. Maybe bias is not moderated by motivation, at earlier stages? For example, people habituate more slowly to cross-race faces, showing increased vigilance in arousal of the amygdala (the brain's alarm signal; Hart *et al.*, 2000). But even the amygdala arousal varies as a function of exposure,

values, and goals. Whites' amygdalas do not over-react to famous Black faces, and implicitly prejudiced people show the most amygdala activation (Phelps *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, social interaction goals moderate the amygdala effect; it occurs under social categorization (classifying the racially varied faces by age or gender), but not when the face is treated as a nonsocial object (is there a dot on the photograph?) or as a unique individual (would he like broccoli?) (Wheeler and Fiske, 2001). Thus, even these primitive reactions respond to motivations.

Another way to react against the motivated cognition synthesis is to point out that the distinction is absurd in the first place. On the basis of accelerating accumulation of social neuroscience, I would bet on this as the next antithesis to the current synthesis. The brain does not distinguish affective and cognitive processes as neatly as our theories do. Although certain systems seem to reflect certain emotions, we will likely find that we cannot allocate certain systems in the brain to cognitive neuroscience and others to affective neuroscience. Ironically, as we study ever more micro processes, we are forced to talk to each other across the macro boundaries.

What does this mean for the social psychology of bias, and more generally for the social psychology of ordinary unethical behavior? The brain is nothing if not plastic and responsive. It means that we must be careful *not* to equate "cognitive" with inevitable, and motivation with "controllable." It means we will be usefully employed for a few years to come.

The practical lessons from the research on intent and ordinary bias are that policymakers and managers need to facilitate both information and motivation, to encourage decision-makers' least biased evaluations of other people. Information has to be accurate, relevant, and unambiguous. For example, adequate, relevant information about the qualifications of a new employee from an underrepresented group can override assumptions that the person is an allegedly unqualified affirmative action hire.

In addition, motivations have to encourage people to be accurate. Organizations can facilitate decision-makers' thoughtful reasoning about others by the values that supervisors communicate, accountability to those supervisors, organizational structures that stress teamwork, and encouraging people's better selves. Accountability and interdependence rely on the bald use of incentives. Organizational and individual values rely on more subtle but equally impactful guides to behavior.

It's too soon to take practical lessons from neuroscience, except to admit that cognition, affect, and motivation do not separate in any tidy fashion, and all must be addressed in any interventions designed to encourage ordinary ethical behavior. Constructive cognition can result only from the availability of appropriate information, ethical motivation can result from incentives or values, and adaptive affect results from the right combination of each. All these factors are knowable and controllable by policymakers and managers, to encourage more ethical ordinary behavior.

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