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Resolving the Paradox of Race

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By **Linda R. Tropp** and **Rachel D. Godsil**

This is the first of a four-part series exploring how racial bias and prejudice continue to have a negative impact in America, despite Americans' widespread rejection of racist ideologies. It draws extensively from our volume, [The Science of Equality: Addressing Implicit Bias, Racial Anxiety, and Stereotype Threat in Education and Healthcare](#)

(http://diversity.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/ScienceofEquality_web.pdf). This first part explores how implicit or subconscious (/basics/unconscious) bias can affect our behavior.

Many white Americans, examining their own values and belief systems, genuinely believe themselves to be non-racist. They conclude that race (/basics/race-and-ethnicity) has diminished in significance—and point to such high-profile examples as the election of a black president to confirm their belief that race has ceased to be an important factor in American society. Yet people of color—particularly black people—often have a very different view of how much race affects their lives and opportunities. In a [2013 Gallup poll \(http://www.gallup.com/poll/163610/gulf-grows-black-white-views-justice-system-bias.aspx\)](#), 68 percent of African Americans and 40 percent of Hispanics stated that the American

Justice system is biased against black people, compared to only 25 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Black similarly feel they are at a disadvantage getting jobs (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/164153/1963-blacks-feel-disadvantaged-getting-jobs.aspx>). This is the central paradox of race today: White people genuinely believe that they and most other whites are not “racist,” while most African Americans and Latinos believe that America continues to be biased against them. What accounts for this difference?

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Of course, it's possible that one side is either wrong or simply lying ([/basics/deception](#)). But we believe a better explanation for the coexistence of these two contradictory ideas is that most whites are not consciously and deliberately racist, but harbor implicit racial biases that operate at a subconscious level. For example, whites may consciously reject the association of blacks with criminality. But they may subconsciously hold on to such stereotypes ([/basics/bias](#)) in ways that negatively affect their behavior toward blacks. Because these biases are implicit—that is to say, subconscious—most whites aren't even aware of holding them.

Racism is widely repudiated in American society, so it can be difficult to determine what people's attitudes and beliefs about race actually are. People may be reluctant to admit to having racist feelings, or they may be genuinely unaware of having them. Social scientists have developed an increasingly sophisticated array of mechanisms to identify and measure automatic stereotypes and attitudes. For example, the Implicit Association Test measures whether there is a time difference between a person's ability to associate black or white faces with positive or negative concepts. (For an explanation of the test—and to try taking it yourself, click [here](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html) (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>).)

Technological developments are advancing this work further: physiological tools such as fMRIs (<http://www.nature.com/neuro/journal/v6/n12/full/nn1156.html>) can not only measure the presence of implicit bias but whether people are actively trying to suppress those feelings.

Implicit bias isn't necessarily associated with negative attitudes toward other groups. Sometimes it

Just means people don't look as favorably on out-groups as they do on members of their own group. Psychologists suggest that "in-group" preference (<http://www.amazon.com/Oxford-Handbook-Personality-Psychology-Library/dp/0199364125>) helps to explain why whites often prefer and judge favorably their fellow whites, even as they have neutral—rather than consciously negative—attitudes toward blacks and other outgroup members. This combination of implicit bias and in-group positive regard can produce results that mirror old-fashioned racism, even in the absence of any actual malice or intent to be biased.

Here are some of the ways that implicit bias has been shown to affect behavior:

- In laboratory studies, it can affect the speed with which a police officer decides to shoot (<https://www.blinn.edu/brazos/socialscience/Psyc/Correll%20et%20al.pdf>) a possible threat based on race.
- It can lower the rate of job callbacks (<http://asr.sagepub.com/content/74/5/777.abstract>) for equally qualified black candidates;
- It can mean that doctors react with less urgency (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10029647>) when black patients present with acute symptoms (such as strokes or heart attacks) requiring thrombolysis;
- It can increase the likelihood that African Americans with stereotypically black features receive longer prison sentences (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16683924>) or are even sentenced to death.

Although we mostly focus on black-white relations, it's important to note that implicit bias operates in ways that go well beyond this familiar racial binary. For example, researchers have found that many white Americans tend to underestimate the capability of Asian prosecutors, perhaps because of the stereotype of Asians as "polite" and unaggressive. Likewise, it's important to note that our focus on the subconscious or hidden dimension of bias doesn't mean that we believe racism is hopeless or ineradicable. There are ways to combat implicit bias in ourselves and in others, which we will discuss in a later section.

But before we get there, we have to note an unfortunate irony. Becoming more self-aware about racial dynamics and concerned about our own hidden biases can have a counterproductive side-effect: Increasing feelings of racial anxiety. In our next post, we will explore how racial anxiety--and a second cognitive (/basics/cognition) "trap" called stereotype threat--can diminish the quality of cross-group

Interpersonal interactions and inadvertently end up reinforcing existing racial inequalities.

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