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Facing Our Racial Biases Via the Implicit Association Test

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Abstract

Classroom discussions around race and difference are often difficult and challenging. We all come to our social interactions as products of our cultural selves, race being one of a myriad of multi-faceted characteristics. Therefore, while many feel that race is something that is discussed ad nauseam, others feel that such discussions rarely scratch the surface. This exercise uses the Implicit Association Test on race to encourage students to reflect upon and examine their hidden biases and address the role those biases play in potential communicative interactions, decisions, actions, and even emotions that they, the students, likely have of people of a particular race. Given the centrality of communication to our behaviors, worldview, identity, and relationships, this assignment is not only relevant to the discipline, but it can be used in several communication courses. Although students initially respond with resistance to seeing their own biases, subsequent written reflection and class discussion provide them the opportunity to see how powerfully prior associations impact them, how communication plays a vital role in the process through which those biases are created and perpetuated, and how negative associations can be overcome.

Courses

Intercultural Communication; Fundamentals of Oral Communication where race, culture, ethnicity are addressed; Popular Culture; Interpersonal Communication

Objectives:

- To explain how and why people make certain racial associations.
- To address how societal messages can impact possible personal beliefs, perceptions and behaviors.
- To explain how our unconscious beliefs about race can conflict with our conscious ones and impact behaviors and interactions.

Introduction and Rationale

Issues around race, discrimination, and bias seem to confound people while they heavily occupy popular discourse. The election of Barack Obama in 2008 as America’s first African American president ushered in a series of discussions asserting that the US

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had become a post-racial society where race was something that was finally in our nation’s collective rear view mirror. Shortly after the election, an article in The Atlantic (Hsu, 2009) examined whether the identity of “whiteness” might be eroding due to multicultural intersections and to the growth of multiracial couples and families, resulting in what the author referred to as a “beiging” of America. The author went so far as to suggest that being white may eventually become a disadvantaged identity due to its absence of coolness, and a post-white world could be looming (Hsu, 2009).

However, complex racial dynamics have not seemed to diminish since Obama’s election and subsequent 2012 reelection. In fact, recent events such as George Zimmerman’s murder trial for the shooting death of African American teen Trayvon Martin and subsequent commentary brought issues of race right back to the forefront (Zimmerman, himself, has been described as “white Hispanic” due to his Peruvian heritage (Fish, 2013). The recent Coke Cola Super Bowl advertisement featuring Americans of varied ethnic backgrounds singing “America the Beautiful” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=443Vy3l0gJs) stirred anglocentric-based discussions on message boards about who gets to claim the American identity. Therefore, even though America has often touted itself as a nation of immigrants and a nation of acceptance, its citizens still wrestle with issues about difference and bias.

Hsu (2009) provides points to ponder in the 21st century:

“We aspire to be post-racial, but we still live within the structures of privilege, injustice, and racial categorization that we inherited from an older order. We can talk about defining ourselves by lifestyle rather than skin color, but our lifestyle choices are still racially coded. We know, more or less, that race is a fiction that often does more harm than good, and yet it is something we cling to without fully understanding why—as a social and legal fact, a vague sense of belonging and place that we make solid through culture and speech.”

These nuances and societal tensions merit the importance and relevance of this assignment employing Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz’s (1998) Implicit Association (IAT) to encourage students to assess and reflect on their own preconceived notions of race. Communication, as the means through which we co-create and develop meaning, plays a key role in racial discussions. Not only does it work as a tool that can allow us to share and better understand perceptions and perspectives between and among cultures, it also provides the means for how we create and develop our sense of identity (Adler & Rodman, 2012). Results from the IAT can form a valuable venue for transformative and reparative continued discussions about race.

Description of the Activity

Part I

The instructor should do some set up leading to this assignment. Readings and class discussion about race perceptions and media influences provide an effective way to introduce the topic, particularly since conversations around race tend to be
uncomfortable. This is a way to contextualize the complexities in racial perceptions. Several chapters in Martin & Nakayama’s Intercultural Communication in Contexts (2010) cover these issues in a fundamental manner. Chapter 5 addresses racial categorization, the social construction of race as well as legal implications. Chapter 7 discusses stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and non-verbal bias, all of which impact our judgments and potential behaviors towards others. Chapter 9 highlights the impact of popular culture and how we learn a lot (in positive as well as problematic ways) about others from exposure to various media artifacts. The instructor should use these chapters or similar material to explain the cognitive complexity humans deal with when drawing conclusions. On pages 364-365, Martin and Nakayama use Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model to explain how people can draw different conclusions when exposed to a text, (i.e. a television show, magazine picture, etc.) due to their experiences, social interactions, and motivations (2010). These social elements, along with each person’s individual characteristics construct their identity impact how they create meaning.

Students should also be assigned Chapter 3 in Malcolm Gladwell’s (2005) Blink. This chapter explains the concepts around the mental associations that people make and how powerful unconscious attitudes are, even if they conflict with conscious attitudes. Gladwell also explains the background and workings of the Implicit Association Test, especially with regard to how we can be socialized to make certain associations about certain people—in this case, black people. This information should form the basis of the instructor-led discussions during the debriefing period, since many students will get results that conflict with their conscious beliefs and feelings.

Also, students should be instructed to read the sections that provide an overview of the IAT, background, ethical considerations, and frequently asked questions. This material is on the Project Implicit section of the Harvard University homepage, located at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/ and all of this material serves to help address issues of possible discomfort with the results, test reliability, how and why it’s used, and what the results suggest.

It may be appropriate here to initiate additional class discussion that provides an example of how implicit associations may play out and how people often act or react based upon their unconscious attitudes as opposed to their conscious ones. In my home of Baltimore, Maryland, a Latino student was hospitalized in June, 2014, after a fight with a black student. News reports such as that located at http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2014-06-04/news/bs-md-digital-tension-20140604_1_digital-harbor-high-school-good-students-social-media (Bowie & Campbell, 2014) suggested that this event underscored pent up tensions between these two groups that have been simmering for years, particularly due to discourse around a large influx of undocumented immigrants. Although there has been some debate as to whether this was actually a racially-charged incident or just a fight between two people who didn’t like each other, the prevailing discussion in the city does raise the issue of bias. The instructor can let the students read the accompanying article and have them discuss what, if any, racial biases played a role in the fight and why the media coverage decided to focus on racial tensions. It may help minimize some of the discomfort that tends to come up during this assignment.

The instructor may want to use an alternate or additional example to help illustrate the impact of implicit associations. When People magazine named Oscar winner...
Lupita Nyong’o as one of their 50 Most Beautiful, and her face graced the cover (http://www.people.com/people/package/article/0,,20360857_20809287,00.html) rekindling a long-running conversation about skin color, race, and beauty. This photograph and Nyong’o’s selection may be an effective entry point for discussing stereotypical American beauty traits, (e.g., blonde, thin, white, and tall), and how we tend to draw snap judgments about certain depictions of beauty while rejecting others. In the brief accompanying article, Nyong’o discusses struggling to find comfort with her appearance, given that there were few media examples of women who mirrored her dark brown coloring and tightly curled hair.

Part II

Outside of class, students will take the Race IAT which can be located at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/selectatest.html. There are several implicit association tests so it is important to clarify that for the purposes of this assignment, they are to take the one that is specific to Race. The instructor should also check this web link regularly to ensure that it takes the users to the appropriate site. There have been times when I have given the assignment and the site took the user to a different test. In the event that this should occur, users can follow the following link through the Understanding Prejudice website. http://www.understandingprejudice.org/index.php
Click on the section where it says “Test Yourself for Hidden Biases.” The user will be taken to the Implicit Associations tests on Race as well as one on Gender. Make sure they take the test on Race. They may want to take the test on gender as a warm up to get used to the test-taking style; to help minimize anxiety by desensitizing themselves to the idea that they do, indeed have biases; or even just out of curiosity. Students are also welcome to take any of the other implicit association tests for the same reasons.

Part III

Once students have taken the test, they will get a result indicating how strongly they associate certain characteristics with blacks and whites. These results suggest a degree of bias either toward black people or toward white people. They should state their results and as part of a written reflection, and then discuss these results and their feelings about those results. The reflection should also include discussion on these additional questions: What did you learn about yourself after seeing the results of your test? Were you surprised in any way? How do you think these results impact your intercultural communication encounters? How do racial perceptions create problems in communication?
Debriefing

More than 80 percent of people who have taken the Race IAT, regardless of racial background or explicit behaviors, have pro-white associations (Gladwell, 2005). So, it is not surprising that many students are very upset with their results. Many students will declare that the test is compromised, they will deny their results, they will retake the test, they will also declare that they are not racist, concluding that the test results yield that conclusion.

It is very important that the instructor refers students back to the *Blink* reading and that he/she uses that as a basis to explain the differences between implicit and explicit associations. The instructor should also discuss that cultural messages, media images, and symbolic discourses play a powerful role in why people tend to score the way they do. The instructor needs to explain why their results do not necessarily indicate that they have racist leanings, but they likely do internalize certain biases. It does not mean that their implicit and explicit associations will match or represent their sincere feelings. In other words, it’s okay and we all can learn from these results. Even talking about them can help overcome the negative associations.

A slide show from “The Oprah Winfrey Show” (Rakieten, 2007) found at the url http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Overcoming-Prejudice shows an example of extreme bias based on one’s sexual orientation, as well as one based on religious bias. The site also provides an informative restatement about the use of the IAT and the commonality of implicit associations that is phrased in a simple and accessible way.

I prefer to use this as part of our debriefing discussions because it reiterates what I’ve addressed in the readings and the lectures prior to having the students take the IAT, and the Oprah show format makes it palatable and understandable. I go through the slides with them and the examples of prejudice that are discussed. As the slideshow moves into the IAT, I spend extra time restating the subject matter. It helps them to better understand the difference between overt behaviors and how implicit associations can contribute to those behaviors. It’s important to repeatedly go back to the Gladwell chapter, the Project Implicit homepage, and the Oprah slide show to explain that their results do not mean that they are racist because many students will be tempted toward that conclusion.

Appraisal

This assignment and activity has always led to a turning point in this class. Many students have results that fall into the “pro-white associations” category, just like the majority of people who take this test, so their reactions reflect their unsettled emotions. The ensuing discussion is necessary because it creates a safe environment for them to express these feelings. It also allows them to develop a better understanding as to what factors influence their results and hence, conclusions and behaviors drawn by themselves and others in society. The recent media coverage over the case popularly-known as the “loud music trial,” where a Caucasian man was convicted of attempted murder for shooting into a vehicle filled with African-American teenage boys, could provide another discussion point around this topic. The aforementioned George Zimmerman/Trayvon Martin case could provide another one. It may help if the instructor gives personal examples of when they’ve fallen prey to their own implicit associations, so the students
see that it is part of how we’re all socialized. Key to this assignment is guiding the students in understanding the multi-layered complexities in racial bias. As stated in the reading material, media images, interpersonal discussions, life experiences, legal dynamics, proximity and regular or sporadic interactions with people of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds impact our implicit and explicit associations, powerfully impacting the conclusions we all draw.

A person is never just their race. They are a combination of many biological, physical and cultural factors. Race is not a linear concept, and discussion about the multiple factors that encompass a person’s identity can help students to understand why race is understood so differently. The students should also be pointed back to the Oprah (Rakieten, 2007) slide show and the Gladwell (2006) reading to illustrate how those same aforementioned communication issues that can impact implicit associations in a negative way can be used to impact them positively. The instructor does not want to shame the students but instead, help them to understand how and why these associations are common among people of varied backgrounds, even those who are of African descent.

The post-IAT discussion is also an important time to encourage students to develop an awareness and presence of their racial associations, while attempting to unpack their personal experiences that may have impacted their IAT results. If they are unhappy about their results, how can they shift their experiences so that they might get a different result in the future? Should they socialize with different people or watch different programming? The instructor can encourage students to examine some of their snap judgments and reflect on the processes through which they drew certain racially-oriented conclusions. Another point to keep in mind is that 20 percent of the people who take the Race IAT do not have strong anti-black or pro-white associations. These individuals should be encouraged to share and discuss their experiences and help explain their results.

As previously stated, this assignment is designed to address how and why we draw certain conclusions about race, and to help us develop an awareness about our implicit associations. It is not to embarrass or stigmatize. Throughout the course, it is likely that examples of implicit associations will surface and the instructor can raise them for short class discussions to reiterate this lesson or encourage students to bring in examples for class participation credit.

References


