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Implicit bias, awareness and imperfect cognitions[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Are individuals responsible for behaviour that is implicitly biased? Implicitly biased actions are those which manifest the distorting influence of implicit associations. That they express these ‘implicit’ features of our cognitive and motivational make up has been appealed to in support of the claim that, because individuals lack the relevant awareness of their morally problematic discriminatory behaviour, they are not responsible for behaving in ways that manifest implicit bias. However, the claim that such influences are implicit is, in fact, not straightforwardly related to the claim that individuals lack awareness of the morally problematic dimensions of their behaviour. Nor is it clear that lack of awareness does absolve from responsibility. This may depend on whether individuals culpably fail to know something that they should know. I propose that an answer to this question, in turn, depends on whether other imperfect cognitions are implicated in any lack of the relevant kind of awareness.

In this paper I clarify our understanding of ‘implicitly biased actions’ and then argue that there are three different dimensions of awareness that might be at issue in the claim that individuals lack awareness of implicit bias. Having identified the relevant sense of awareness I argue that only one of these senses is defensibly incorporated into a condition for responsibility, rejecting recent arguments from Washington & Kelly for an ‘externalist’ epistemic condition. Having identified what individuals should – and can – know about their implicitly biased actions, I turn to the question of whether failures to know this are culpable. This brings us to consider the role of implicit biases in relation to other imperfect cognitions. I conclude that responsibility for implicitly biased actions may depend on answers to further questions about their relationship to other imperfect cognitions.

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1. Introduction

Are individuals responsible for behaviour that is implicitly biased? Implicitly biased actions are those which manifest the distorting influence of implicit associations. That they express these ‘implicit’ features of our cognitive and motivational make up has been appealed to in support of the claim that, because individuals lack the relevant awareness of their morally problematic discriminatory behaviour, they are not responsible for behaving in ways that manifest implicit bias. However, the claim that such influences are implicit is, in fact, not straightforwardly related to the claim that individuals lack awareness of the morally problematic dimensions of their behaviour. Nor is it clear that lack of awareness does absolve from responsibility. This may depend on whether individuals culpably fail to know something that they should know. I propose that an answer to this question, in turn, depends on whether other imperfect cognitions are implicated in any lack of the relevant kind of awareness.

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In Section 2 clarify our understanding of ‘implicitly biased actions’ and then argue that there are three different dimensions of awareness that might be at issue in the claim that individuals lack awareness of implicit bias. Having identified the relevant sense of awareness, in Section 3, I argue that only one of these senses is defensibly incorporated into a condition for responsibility, rejecting recent arguments from Washington & Kelly for an ‘externalist’ epistemic condition. Having identified what individuals should – and can – know about their implicitly biased actions, I turn in Section 4 to the question of whether failures to know this are culpable. This brings us to consider the role of implicit biases in relation to other imperfect cognitions. I conclude that responsibility for implicitly biased actions may depend on answers to further questions about their relationship to other imperfect cognitions.

2. Implicit bias, and awareness of it

What are the phenomena at issue when we talk of implicit biases? Amodio and Mendoza (2010) describe them as ‘associations stored in memory’ (364).¹ These associations can influence behaviours and judgements. For example, implicit associations have been posited as explaining differential evaluations of the same CV whose only difference was race, indicated by the name at the top (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000); as implicated in shooter bias, whereby in a computer simulation individuals were more likely to ‘shoot’ black men with weapons than white men with weapons (Glaser & Knowles, 2008); and as playing a role in the seating distances between experimental participants and stigmatised group members (Tidswell, Sheeran, & Webb, in preparation). But what is it about the associations involved in producing such varied behaviour that makes them implicit, and how do we delineate which of the many associations of this sort constitute biases?

2.1. ‘Implicit’

Some have suggested that associations are implicit simply because the measure used to access them is an implicit one; namely, one that does not rely on self-report measures, nor the voluntary offering of information about one’s attitudes. An implicit measure might involve a prime of which the agent is not aware, then a measure of how being so primed influences behaviour or judgement. But why use an implicit measure to access these associations? One reason is that individuals may not be forthcoming or frank about associations they would rather they did not have. Another reason is that the associations are characterised by features of automatic processes which render them difficult for the agent to identify and report on. DeHouwer, Teige-Mocigemba, Spruyt, and Moors (2009) pick out the following features as ones taken to be characteristic of implicit associations: operation without the guidance of proximal goals (that would enable the agent to initiate, intervene or stop the processes); operation without substantial cognitive resources (such as when one’s attention is occupied with some other task); and operation with very limited time (such as when one is required to respond very quickly); or without awareness. Notably, some philosophers and psychologists have taken this latter feature as characteristic or even definitional of implicit bias (see e.g. Kelly & Roedder, 2008; Washington & Kelly, in press; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Saul, 2013). I will say much more about this characteristic in the following. What is important is that these features are not specified as necessary for an association to be implicit, which leaves considerable scope for variation in the properties of the associations being measured in such studies, and discussed in subsequent philosophical literatures.²

2.2. ‘Bias’

What is it about some implicit associations that should lead us to characterise them as ‘biases’? We can think of such associations as biases when they are disposed to exert a distorting influence on judgement. The influence at issue can be characterised as distorting in that it leads to a judgement which departs from the norms of rationality. This can be most clearly seen in the CV studies mentioned above: the name at the top of a CV does not provide a reason for judging it to be better or worse than an otherwise identical CV. It is less clear how this analysis explains the behavioural outputs, such as increased seating distance from stigmatised groups. One possibility would be to extend the definition to include not only distortions of judgement but also undesired or undesirable influences on action. Another would be to suppose that these behaviours are preceded by (tacit) judgements, which are distorted (judgements about the suitable place to arrange the seat say; or about the level of danger posed by an individual). Perhaps either way of proceeding is adequate, but for the sake of providing a simple contrast with explicit bias, I will work with the model that sees all implicitly biased action as involving a distortion of judgement. This judgement is sometimes the output measured; in other cases it informs the behavioural output which is measured.³

We can proceed, then, with the following understanding of implicit bias: it is operative when implicit associations produce a distorting influence on judgement and hence behaviour informed by that judgement (this leaves room for some implicit associations which are not implicit biases).

¹ As to what associations are – what ontology of the mind best accommodates them – I remain agnostic. Nothing in my argument to follow depends on one particular interpretation of what implicit associations are or how they are structured.

² Thanks to Robin Scaife and Tom Stafford for very helpful discussion of how we should understand the notion of ‘implicit’ in this context. This passage has been informed not only by these discussions, but by Robin’s very useful blogpost on this topic: <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/biasandblame/2014/02/24/what-is-implicit-about-implicit-biases/#comments>.

³ Again, many thanks to Tom Stafford and Robin Scaife for fruitful discussions of this issue.

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