Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 128 (2015) 96–107

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Some evidence for the nonverbal contagion of racial bias

Greg Willard [a], Kyonne-Joy Isaac [b], Dana R. Carney [c,*]

[a] Harvard University, United States
[b] Princeton University, United States
[c] University of California, Berkeley, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 August 2013
Revised 18 March 2015
Accepted 12 April 2015
Available online 30 April 2015

Keywords:
Attitudes
Contagion
Implicit bias
Nonverbal behavior
Prejudice
Race-bias

ABSTRACT

Four experiments provide evidence for the hypothesis that we can "catch" racial bias from others by merely observing subtle nonverbal cues. Video recordings were made of white participants (with varying levels of racial bias) interacting with a neutral black confederate. Videos contained subtle expressions of positivity or negativity, corresponding to white participants' levels of bias. Participants randomly assigned to observe the subtle anti-black bias videos (vs. pro-black) formed more negative impressions of the black person (Experiment 1), adopted more negative racial stereotypes (Experiment 2), and demonstrated greater anti-black bias themselves (Experiment 3). Participants only demonstrated increased bias when they knew that a black person was the target (vs. white; Experiment 4). Results suggest that nonverbal expressions of racial bias affect more than simply the actor and target—they affect passive, naïve observers. The good news, however, is that the same is true of pro-black bias. Implications for organizations are discussed.

1. Introduction

Racial bias is alive and well. Despite the fact that the United States has an African American president in office—well into his second term at the time this paper was published—racism continues to be a visible and prevalent issue. Current examples range from pop stars' public use of the most derogatory word for African Americans; to police targeting of and violence against people of color; to experimental findings showing that racial minority groups are still less likely to be called for a job interview (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Mobasseri & Srivastava, 2015; Rooth, 2007) or receive promotions (Prewett-Livingston, Feild, Veres, & Lewis, 1996). Examples of the continuing prevalence of racial bias abound. While some forms of racial bias are audible, observable, or otherwise egregious, much of modern racial bias has "gone underground." Today, most racial biases exist, are expressed, and impact social and organizational contexts in more subtle, insidious and less directly observable ways (Jost et al., 2009). These more subtle forms of racial bias are often called unconscious or *implicit* racial biases by science and practice.

Consciously we may want, and try, to hold egalitarian beliefs. However, despite the fact that many of us consciously will ourselves to be egalitarian, the deeper recesses of our minds continue to be held hostage by the history of racism in our culture, the racist jokes we continue to hear, and the constant media portrayals of black Americans as more dangerous, dishonest, inactive, poor, and uneducated than their white American counterparts. These daily exposures—even if the stereotypes are untrue—leave a consequential residue on our minds that can be measured scientifically. These residues, or, implicit biases, are pervasive and costly, but malleable. As this research will demonstrate, these biases can also be *contagious*.

Although unconscious biases are subtle, they are automatically and sometimes uncontrollably expressed through negative nonverbal behaviors. For example, in both organizational and ordinary social situations, whites who have bias against blacks sit further away from, make less eye contact, smile less, and orient their bodies away from them (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974). Sometimes—maybe even *often*—the person expressing racial bias has little conscious awareness that he or she is expressing that bias through behavior, or that he or she is biased in the first place.

What happens when we observe these subtle acts of racial bias? Are we mortified to see biased behavior, or does it subtly slip through the cracks of our conscious awareness? And, if we are unaware, can these subtly expressed biases influence us, without our

* Corresponding author at: University of California, Berkeley, Faculty Building #573, Berkeley, CA 94720-1900, United States.
E-mail address: dcarney@berkeley.edu (D.R. Carney).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2015.04.002
0749-5978/

will or consent? After all, we readily assimilate to emotions and behaviors around us—the human brain appears to be hard-wired to do so (Asch, 1955; Bandura, 1977; Cialdini, 1993; Sinclair, Lowery, Hardin, & Colangelo, 2005; Walden & Ogan, 1988; Zimbardo, 1971). Beginning with Becker (1931), there has been more than 80 years of research on the communicable transmission of emotions (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), beliefs (Aarts, Gollwitzer, & Hassin, 2004; Hatfield et al., 1994), morality (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009), and mental states (Hatfield et al., 1994) through nonverbal behavior. Are racial biases similarly contagious? This question is the focus of the current research.

1.1. Is implicit racial bias contagious? A question of particular importance to the workplace

For a culture that decidedly wants to be egalitarian and meritocratic, the existence of racial bias is broadly problematic. It has been convincingly argued that changes at a broad societal level must begin at the most local level—within our families, schools, and organizations (see Bobo, 2001). Indeed, subtle racial bias in our organizations is still pervasive and pernicious. Jost et al. (2009) highlighted 10 empirical articles that no manager should ignore, representing more than 35 years of research on implicit racial bias. The authors reviewed robust evidence for the observable impact of these biases on governmental policy and continued organizational problems with hiring, promotion, turnover, and job satisfaction. The empirical reports summarized by Jost et al. (2009) demonstrate a number of adverse organizational consequences likely due to implicit racial biases. For example, job applicants with "black names" (e.g., "Jamaal") were 50% less likely to receive job interviews than applicants with "white names" (e.g., "Jordan"; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Similarly, Rooth (2007) found employment recruiters who favored their ingroup (native Swedes) over a stigmatized outgroup (arabs in Sweden) were significantly less likely to grant equally qualified outgroup members a job interview. Overall, ingroup members were three times more likely to receive callbacks than outgroup members. Rudman and Glick (2001) found that the most competent and confident female managerial applicants were also liked the least. Compared to whites, black managers and workers report lower overall job satisfaction (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Black managers and workers report feeling less welcome in their organizations, less valued, and having less control; they also receive worse job performance evaluations, and—unless the decision-maker was black—are less likely to receive promotions (Prewett-Livingston et al., 1996).

What makes the prevalence of racial bias in the workplace even more problematic is that American adults spend a significant amount of their waking hours at work. Averaging 1700 h at work in 2012, the adult American worker was "at the office" for a greater amount of time than adults in several countries world-wide, including historically "workaholic" countries such as Germany and Korea (Feenstra, Inklaar, & Timmer, 2013). Given the demonstrated American work-ethic, one is highly likely to learn new things about the way of the world (and eradicate old lessons) while at work. Thus, a first stop in mitigating broader racial bias must be to address it where adults spend the most time—at work.

Researchers over the last few decades have begun focusing on the firm to better understand the causes, mechanisms and deleterious individual- and group-level consequences of social biases generally, and racial bias specifically (e.g.: Bielby, 2000; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001; Lefkowitz, 1994; Newman & Lyon, 2009; Prewett-Livingston et al., 1996; Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). With the high proliferation of diversity and inclusion trainings, policies and initiatives in recent years seeming to reduce the prevalence of overt discriminatory behaviors, several scholars have theorized that racial bias in the workplace is now subtle—that is, manifested more through *less-obvious, everyday harassment* (Cortina, 2008; Deitch et al., 2003; Hays-Thomas & Bendick, 2013). In fact, Cortina, Lonsway, and Magley (2004) documented a significantly higher prevalence of *workplace incivility*, or subtly deviant, disrespectful behaviors, toward ethnic minority employees in two different organizational contexts. This vivid example of "incivility" is exactly what decades of research on subtle expressions of racial bias has been arguing exists.

1.2. The nonverbal expression of modern (i.e., more subtle) racial bias

Modern racial bias is expressed through observable nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, vocal attributes, and body movements. Sometimes the behaviors are very "micro" and just barely observable, and other times the behaviors are more "macro" and obvious. Beginning with seminal work by Word et al. (1974), which examined the nonverbal expression of bias toward blacks in job interviews, research has repeatedly shown that whites express racial bias toward blacks through interpersonal "coldness" including less eye contact, fewer smiles, more physical distance; and interpersonal threat including more frequent blinking (Dovidio et al., 2002; Fazio et al., 1995; McConnell & Leibold, 2001). And, from the literature on the meaning of these nonverbal cues, we know that more interpersonal distance, less smiling, less positivity, and more gaze aversion signal antipathy and avoidance (e.g., Andersen, 1985; Argyle, 1967).

The nonverbal expression of anti-black bias through negative nonverbal behavior does more than simply create an immediate uncomfortable social situation. Blacks on the receiving end of the behavioral expression of bias know they are being discriminated against (e.g., Richeson & Shelton, 2005), and this targeting undermines their ability to trust fellow co-workers, or believe they work in an office with integrity (Abbott, 2001). Moreover, chronic exposure to bias exerts a significant impact on negative workplace behavior (e.g., employee absenteeism; Avery, McKay, Wilson, & Tonidandel, 2007), as well as on health and well-being generally (Mays, Cochran, & Barnes, 2006; Paradies, 2006; Pascoe & Richman, 2009). But do nonverbal expression of bias affect another person, if he or she were merely watching the social interaction unfold?

1.3. Dominant theories of social cognition support a bias contagion hypothesis

Many theoretical positions and experimental results suggest that merely observing a nonverbal act of racial bias might shape one's own racial bias. At the broadest level, dominant theories of automatic and controlled processes would suggest that passive observation of a subtle or ambiguous act of prejudice or discrimination should lead to uncorrected or uninhibited assimilative shifts in perception, cognition, and behavior (e.g., the QUAD Model by Conrey, Sherman, Gawronski, Hughenberg, & Groom, 2005; the APE Model by Gawronksi & Bodenhausen, 2007; the MODE Model by Fazio, 1990). Equally as compelling, psychological principles such as associative learning suggest that one can learn to dislike novel categories of humans and objects by observing the pairing of particular individuals (e.g., black Americans) with evaluative attributes (e.g., "dislike"; Olson & Fazio, 2002; Rydell & McConnell, 2006), as might be widely seen in popular media.