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# The price of prejudice

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It's what you do that counts—not what you say you'd do

NOBODY likes to admit an uncomfortable truth about himself, especially when charged issues such as race, sex, age and even supersized waistlines come into play. That makes the task of the behavioural scientist a difficult one. Not only may participants in a study be lying to those running a test, but they may also, fundamentally, be lying to themselves.

Prising the lid off human assumptions and hidden biases thus requires clever tools. One of the most widely deployed, known as the implicit-association test, measures how quickly people associate words describing facial characteristics with different types of faces that display those characteristics. When such characteristics are favourable—"laughter" or "joy", for example—it often takes someone longer to match them with faces that they may, unconsciously, view unfavourably (old, if the participant is young, or non-white if he is white). This procedure thus picks up biases that the participants say they are not aware of having.
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Whether these small differences in what are essentially artificial tasks really reflect day-to-day actions and choices was, until recently, untested. But that has changed. In a paper to be published next month in Social Cognition, a group of researchers led by Eugene Caruso of the University of Chicago report their use of a technique called conjoint analysis, which they have adopted from the field of market research and adapted to study implicit biases in more realistic situations.

Conjoint analysis, they think, lets them quantify what has been dubbed the "stereotype tax"—the price that the person doing the stereotyping pays for his preconceived notions. In two studies, they turn their new tool loose on questions of the perception of weight and sex.
Know thyself not

Conjoint analysis asks participants to evaluate a series of products that vary in several important attributes, such as televisions of various screen sizes, brands and prices. By varying these attributes in a systematic way market researchers can measure with reasonable precision how much each trait is worth. They can then calculate how big a premium people are willing to pay in one attribute (price) to get what they want in another (a larger screen).

In their first study, Dr Caruso and his team recruited 101 students and asked them to imagine they were taking part in a team trivia game with a cash prize. Each student was presented with profiles of potential team-mates and asked to rate them on their desirability.

The putative team-mates varied in several ways. Three of these were meant to correlate with success at trivia: educational level, IQ and previous experience with the game. In addition, each profile had a photo which showed whether the team-mate was slim or fat. After rating the profiles, the participants were asked to say how important they thought each attribute was in their decisions.

Not surprisingly, they reported that weight was the least important factor in their choice. However, their actual decisions revealed that no other attribute counted more heavily. In fact, they were willing to sacrifice quite a bit to have a thin team-mate. They would trade 11 IQ points—about 50% of the range of IQs available—for a colleague who was suitably slender.

In a second study the team asked another group, this time of students who were about to graduate, to consider hypothetical job opportunities at consulting firms. The positions varied in starting salary, location, holiday time and the sex of the potential boss.

When it came to salary, location and holiday, the students' decisions matched their stated preferences. However, the boss's sex turned out to be far more important than they said it was (this was true whether a student was male or female). In effect, they were willing to pay a 22% tax on their starting salary to have a male boss.

A black and white answer

A recent paper in Science adds further fuel to the notion that implicit biases and inaccurate self-perceptions do indeed exist and need further study. A team led by Kerry Kawakami from York University in Canada conducted an experiment to try to understand how racism persisted despite most people roundly condemning it.

Dr Kawakami, too, used students. She recruited 120 who identified themselves as not being black, and then divided them into two equal groups. Members of one group were brought, one by one, into a waiting room with two other "students", one black and one white, who were, in fact, in on the experiment.

As they waited, the black "student" stepped out of the room to retrieve a mobile phone, gently bumping the knee of the white "student" on the way out. Then, one of three things happened: either the incident passed without comment; or the white "student" remarked "Typical, I hate it when black people do that"; or he sniped "Clumsy nigger". At this point, the study master returned and administered a test meant to measure emotional state. Finally, the study participant was asked to choose one of the two "students" as a partner for a subsequent test.

The other group was treated slightly differently. Participants were not actually brought into the waiting room but were asked to imagine themselves there, either by reading a description of what happened or by watching a videotaped version of the proceedings.

Both those who read what had happened and those who witnessed it on television thought they would be much more upset in the cases involving racist comments than the one involving no comment at all. However, those who had actually been in the waiting room showed little distress in any of the three cases.

In addition, a majority of those imagining the encounter predicted that they would not pick the racist student as their partner. However, those who were actually present in the room showed no tendency to shun the white student, even when he had been rude about the black one. People, it seems, are rather more prejudiced than they think they are.