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Race in Prisons

No One Left to Blame?

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Mahzarin Banaji and ordinary prejudice

Earlier this year, Mahzarin Banaji was in a shop when she saw a young woman dressed in what she describes as a Goth outfit. The young woman was covered in tattoos and had a number of facial piercings. Banaji turned away in distaste. Then she checked herself. She remembered her resolution to engage with people she might otherwise have avoided. She turned back. She made eye contact. She smiled, and initiated a conversation.

The reason Mahzarin Banaji talks to strangers is because in 1995, while working at Harvard University, she developed a test to measure unconscious racism¹. Except she doesn't call it unconscious racism. Others use that term about her work, but she doesn't. She calls it 'ordinary prejudice', and it is that ordinary prejudice that she has resolved to overcome in her everyday life — anyway she can — sometimes by smiling and talking to complete strangers. Because having created the test, she took the test herself; and she didn't like what she found. In fact she couldn't believe it. She found she had unconscious bias — what others might call racism. Banaji says, 'Being in a minority myself, I didn't feel I would have any biases ... I was shocked and humbled ... and I was deeply embarrassed'.

The origins of the Implicit Association Test began a year earlier when Banaji's PhD supervisor realised that when you group flowers with pleasant words it is very easy to make a quick association between the two, but when you group insects with pleasant words, or flowers with unpleasant words, the task becomes unexpectedly tricky. It turns out to be harder to form a mental association between 'insect' and words like 'dream' or 'heaven', and similarly difficult to form a mental association between 'flowers' and words such as 'evil' or 'poison'. Simply put, it takes longer to complete the task of linking the two. The next step was to substitute flowers and insects for white-sounding names, and black-sounding names. And that was how the test began — with names later being replaced with faces.

The reason Banaji and her colleague at Harvard, Robert Greenwald, still find it difficult to associate black

names or black faces with pleasant words, they believe, is the same reason it is harder to associate lightning with horses than with thunder: connecting concepts that the mind perceives as less compatible simply takes extra time. The time difference can be quantified and serves as an objective measure of people's implicit attitudes. When Banaji and her supervisor took the test they were more inclined to associate positively to white people. They were astonished and they wondered if they were alone.

They were not. During this time Banaji also began developing tests for bias against gay people, women and foreigners. Her embarrassment, having taken the test, was felt just as keenly by others who took these new tests. Two prominent gay activists who took the test for a recent article in the *Washington Post*² were both so horrified by the results, they withdrew their consent to be named in the article. The results seemed impossible to them. 'I am surprised' one of the activists said, 'And disappointed in myself', she added. Perhaps she needn't have been so hard on herself — she was certainly not alone. In the years since, 40 per cent of gay and lesbian people showed bias for heterosexual people over homosexual people. She might also have drawn comfort from the fact that a staggering 80 per cent of the 4.5 million people worldwide who have now taken the original race test, have more positive associations to white people. More arresting yet is the fact that 50 per cent of black respondents also have more positive associations to white people.

If you think that's unlikely — and frankly I did — you can take the test yourself: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/demo/>. It takes 10 minutes. You will probably find the same. It will probably surprise you, especially if you think you are the sort of person who's committed to treating everyone equally and you reckon yourself to be without bias. Two thirds of respondents claim exactly that. And yet over 80 per cent of respondents show a bias towards white people, and over 80 per cent of heterosexuals show implicit biases for heterosexual people over homosexual people. Banaji thought of herself as being without prejudice. That's how the gay and lesbian activists who

1. Banaji, M. R. Bazerman, M., & Chugh, D. (2003). 'How (un)ethical are you?' *Harvard Business Review*, 81, 56-64 and Banaji, M. R. (2003). 'The opposite of a great truth is also true' in J. Jost, D. Prentice, & M. R. Banaji (Eds.), *The yin and yang of progress in social psychology: Perspectivism at work* (pp. 127-140). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
2. Shankar Vedantam 'See no bias' *Washington Post Sunday*, January 23, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A27067-2005Jan21.html>

were profiled by the Washington Post thought of themselves. That's what I thought; before doing the test.

How does this relate to the Prison Service?

When we measure who gets what in the Prison Service, we find outcomes for black prisoners in particular are consistently outside the range that we would expect in a number of key areas: most noticeably in relation to use of force, location in the segregation unit and being on the basic regime. In other words, there are patterns of disproportion between different ethnic groups, and black prisoners in particular do worse. In brief, we find disproportionality. These differences are more than can be explained with relations to other factors such as age and nationality. We don't find disproportion across the full range of indicators, but we do find it in key areas and to such an extent that it matters.

Typically we have assumed it is either the consequence of racist behaviour by front line staff, or poorer behaviour by black and minority ethnic prisoners, depending which side of the debate we come down on. Some suggest it is something of each. But perhaps it is neither. Perhaps the problem is of an entirely different sort. Perhaps we are up against what Banaji calls ordinary prejudice. Perhaps *ordinary prejudice* is at work in how we give out services and is influencing our day to day interactions in ways we had not realised.

Having a race-bias is not the same as being racist

Banaji and her research team suggest that what the Implicit Association Test tells us is not that we are racist, but that we have a *race bias*; most people prefer white people³. Same difference — you might say. But let's look again at some of the test results:

- ❑ 50 per cent of African Americans have a positive association to white people — to put that another way, they feel more negatively about black people and they show a pro-white/ anti-black bias. Is it really sensible or meaningful to suggest that they are racist?

- ❑ Are the 10 year olds with pro-white bias who take the test racist? The six year olds who show the same?
- ❑ How do we make sense of the 36 per cent of Muslims who showed an anti-Muslim bias?
- ❑ Or the 38 per cent of gays and lesbians who showed a bias for straight people over gay people. Are we really going to suggest they are homophobic?

Banaji suggests minorities internalise the same biases as majority groups. And indeed, why wouldn't they? Banaji says such results show the pervasive power that cultural biases have even on those who are themselves the victims of such biases and on those who are explicitly committed to having none. Minorities can just as easily harbour biases, absorbed from the larger culture. Most likely, say the team of researchers at Harvard, what they are doing is reacting to the things they see around them — same as everyone else.

The reality is we tend to be more favourably disposed to people like us and to people who are socially favoured over people who are not. This is manifested in a variety of ways: thin people over fat people, tall people over short people and white people over black people.

The team at Harvard suggest we are picking up on social cues all the time, even when we don't

know it. The brain doesn't always learn simply just what it's taught. We can consciously teach people that certain attitudes are right or wrong, but much of what we learn is through repetition and making associations. When you're watching television, for example, the brain is watching who is being shown in positions of authority and influence. This is how a race bias or an implicit association is formed. This is how it comes to be that most people seem to prefer white people. And this is why Banaji asserts that it is an ordinary prejudice.

By the time a child is one or two or three or four, he or she has seen hundreds of thousands of these kinds of associations, and over time begins to respond more favourably to the dominant group. This kind of prejudice is formed in an ordinary way, without your knowing, and it's almost impossible to avoid or control against. The odds that you're going to see a gay family on TV are very slim, so it's not surprising that people think of heterosexual relationships as being more normal. If people are always seeing A associated with B,

The reality is we tend to be more favourably disposed to people like us and to people who are socially favoured over people who are not.

3. Greenwald, A. G., Poehlman, T. A., Uhlmann, E., & Banaji, M. R. (2009). Understanding and using the Implicit Association Test: III. Meta-analysis of predictive validity'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 97, 17-41.

by the 1,000th time, that association becomes hard-wired in the brain. If we are always seeing A associated with B, it also means we don't get a chance to associate A with C. 'The Implicit Association Test measures the thumbprint of the culture on our minds' according to Banaji. The overwhelming majority of the powerful images that we are encountering every day of our lives prime us to respond this way. This is ordinary prejudice, and we all have it — whether we like it or not, whether we admit it or not.

The need for a different approach

So could ordinary prejudice be operating in the Prison Service? And could this account for the disproportionality between different ethnic groups? We think so. Certainly the Service has made great progress since the murder of Zahid Mubarek in 2000. That progress is reported in the Race Review⁴ and was endorsed by some of our harshest critics. That report concludes that we have largely eliminated the most blatant forms of racism. But we don't know as an organisation how to tackle the systemic biases that seem to be in operation and which result in black prisoners being more likely to receive informal punishments, than for formal punishments. As the Race Review concludes: the situation is much improved, but the experience of BME prisoners (and staff) is not transformed. We are a bit stuck. The old ways of diversity training in classrooms have helped us eliminate the blatant and the egregious. But Banaji's work tells us that prejudice and bias are not errors of conscious thought that can be corrected through education. Banaji tells us that such training can only take us so far; it is essentially based on the wrong idea of how people form biases.

The finding that over 80 per cent of all people taking the test, and 50 per cent of black people have more positive associations to white people has the potential to turn on its head what we think we know about prejudice and racism. It radically recasts the debate and runs counter to a number of anti-discriminatory narratives which tend towards fault-finding — whether the fault be found in the black and minority ethnic prisoners and their supposed poorer standards of behaviour, or the staff and their supposed predisposition towards penalising particular groups. The Implicit Association Test research shows that hostility is

not needed for discrimination to occur. Discrimination can and does occur even when no one means for it to. So we need a different approach; one based on ordinary prejudice.

It's what you do, not what you think, that matters...

And that is precisely what we are trying to provide. Just because ordinary prejudice is formed largely without you knowing or consenting to it, it does not follow that nothing can be done. The aim of Banaji's research is not to suggest that prejudice is ok or not that serious or not worth worrying about, rather it demonstrates that prejudice and bias are still very much a part of the world. Banaji thinks prejudice is ordinary and not 'evil in your heart', but she is committed to studying it because she is committed to taking action against it. If anyone thinks Banaji is an apologist for bias they ought to think again. She has been the subject of death threats by white supremacists who understand very clearly that her motivation is to let us know that prejudice is alive and well and operating in every one of us. The prejudice and the implicit associations may be ordinary, but associations lead to assumptions, and assumptions lead to attitudes, and attitudes lead to choices and action.

So what you do matters, and it certainly doesn't follow that you will always act in a biased way. Banaji says people should be judged on how they behave, not how they think. She goes further: she is so convinced about the ability to influence implicit thoughts with explicit behaviour she and her colleagues will testify in court against any attempt to use the test to identify biased individuals. If we know we have a default to a particular racial group — in effect we *prefer* one racial group to another and yet we are also committed to fairness and equality, we better do something about it. That's why Banaji talks to strangers — people who she wouldn't ordinarily seem to get along with — she recognizes that while she may not be to blame, she has a race bias and she goes out of her way to compensate for it, finding conscious ways of compensating for her unconscious tendency to discriminate. We need to think of ways to do the same, and it probably starts with something as simple as finding ways to structure conversations with people we might not usually have conversations with; that is both simple and difficult.

4. National Offender Management Service (2008) *Race Review 2008. Implementing Race Equality in Prisons – Five Years On.*