Race in Prisons

Seeing the wood for the trees

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Rick is trying to get promotion from Officer to Senior Officer. He's passed the exam and the assessment centre, but there are no vacancies at his jail. So he's just been for an interview at another prison — his third in the last few months — and once again the job has gone to someone else. *'From the moment the interview started I just knew it wasn't going to happen'* **he tells his mates in the bar that night.** *'They just didn't like the look of me.'* **'Rubbish',** **says one of his friends,** *'I used to work with one of the guys on the panel. I reckon you were just unlucky — they probably had someone local lined up for it. There'll be other jobs advertised soon.'* **Rick isn't so sure that even if more jobs are advertised any of them will go to him, or to any other black candidate.**

Workshop instructor Ray operates a policy that prisoners who are absent without authorisation are warned twice and on the third occasion sacked. One afternoon Tommo turns up having missed the morning session — his third absence. He jokes about it being his anniversary and how he'd be single — and in all probability dead — if he hadn't stayed back on the wing to call his missus. Ray smiles sympathetically — his wife was far from happy when he forgot her birthday the week before — and says he'll let it go this time, but this really must be the last. The next morning Mr Diouf appears, having been absent (for the third time) the previous afternoon. He apologises for missing the session and asks politely to be given another chance. Ray shakes his head, reiterates the policy and tells him he needs to sort himself out and get more organised. Mr Diouf walks sadly back to the wing, reflecting that he should never have got involved in translating and explaining his cell mate's letter from the Parole Board — just like the previous times that he missed work, he had been so focused on helping someone out that that he had missed the tannoy announcement for prisoners to leave the wing to go to work.

Understanding and Explaining Behaviour

How should we understand and explain the behaviour of the people in these stories? Was the panel biased, or is Rick's just a case of sour grapes? Why does Ray choose to let one prisoner off but not the other?

We think the causes of some types of behaviour are obvious. For example, every parent knows that sugar causes hyperactivity in children.

Except that it doesn't. Scientific studies have shown this theory to be unfounded[1].

So why do we think that it does? We've been thrown by a confounding variable. It's the fun and excitement — and not the cake and fizzy drinks — at the party that cause the children's restlessness when they get home. And then we suffer from confirmation bias — once the theory is in our heads we take notice only when events support it and not when they don't. In fact after a while, our mistaken belief starts to create its own confirmation. The children know that we think that their treats will lead them to act up, so that's precisely what they do. We even convince ourselves that we get a sugar rush when we eat a chocolate bar ourselves.

What if the reasons for other sorts of behaviour — including a lot of our own behaviour — are also less obvious than we think? We tell ourselves that we are the agents in our lives: that we act in the world on the basis of our conscious beliefs and assessment of the evidence in front of us. So we should just ask those involved why they did what they did, right? The panel will reply that they chose the best candidate, and Ray will say that he applies the rules but uses his discretion professionally where the circumstances merit it. But the science says that this is just as wrong as believing in the behavioural effects of sugar. In reality much of our behaviour is caused by factors that we are not aware of. Those involved simply won't be able to tell us the whole story.

Implicit Drivers

Experiments show that holding a hot drink makes us more likely to make a positive assessment of a stranger[2]. After receiving a subliminal prompt about an old person we remember less in a test and walk more slowly down the corridor afterwards[3]. And we are more likely to ask a stranger for a date if we meet them when we've just walked across a rope bridge than when

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1. Wolraich, M.L., Wilson, D.B. and White, J.W. (1995) 'The effect of sugar on behaviour or cognition in children: a meta-analysis', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol 274, no 20, pp1617-21.
2. Williams, L.E. and Bargh, J.A. (2008) 'Experiencing Physical Warmth Promotes Interpersonal Warmth', *Science,* 24 October 2008, vol 322, no 5901, pp606-607.
3. Bargh, J.A., Chen, M. and Burrows, L. (1996) 'Automaticity of Social Behavior: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 71 no 2, pp230-244.

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we've crossed the same river on a solid, permanent structure[4].

In none of these cases are we aware of the effects of the situation on our behaviour. We continue to assert to the experimenter that we chose how to act and made the choice on the basis of a conscious assessment of the evidence. It is the warmth I am feeling because of the coffee in my hand (or the exhilaration I feel from the adrenaline rush of crossing the rope bridge) that leads me to view the new person in front of me more favourably, but I think I've made a judgement about their personality (or sexual attractiveness). Unbeknown to me I have been confronted with the image of someone that I see as forgetful and frail. I probably don't even notice that I'm not doing so well on the test that follows, but if I do I just think that some of the questions are tricky. And I'll either claim that I walked at normal speed down the corridor or attribute my slowness to soreness from the gym the day before.

In psychological terms, we insist that our behaviour is driven by our explicit attitudes and cognitions — the ones that are available to us through introspection. But experiments consistently demonstrate that there are other drivers that we cannot access — our brain has an implicit aspect that influences our behaviour in a way that we are not aware of.

Whilst we cannot access these implicit drivers through introspection, we can come to understand them through testing. Matt Wotton's article in this issue of the journal centres on one of these tests, the Implicit Association Test[5], which shows that we have different patterns of associations about different groups. These associations are typically based in part on group membership and in part on identification with powerful groups in society. Ninety per cent of people associate negative concepts with the group 'elderly'. Three quarters of people (men and women) associate women with home more readily than they do with career. And three quarters of White people

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(and 50 per cent of Black people) show more positive associations to White people than to Black people.

There is evidence that these uneven patterns of implicit associations develop at an early age — tests have shown that babies at 3 months respond differently to faces of different colour to their parents[6], and at 3 years most white children (including those brought up in ethnically diverse areas) will select white faces over black faces when asked whom they'd like as friends[7].

Most importantly, these uneven patterns of associations do not correspond with explicit attitudes as expressed in surveys — they are present in people who show a conscious commitment to egalitarian values, including many of us who spend our working lives tackling discrimination and promoting equality.

This matters because these associations have been found to drive behaviour. Both in experimental situations and in real world studies, such as observations of doctors treating patients from different racial groups[8], implicit associations have been found to be better predictors of behaviour than reported explicit attitudes.

The Role of the Situation

Another key fact about our behaviour is that it changes according to the situation.

Some of the most famous experiments in psychology demonstrate this. The Asch conformity experiments[9] established that when surrounded by fellow participants (in fact confederates of the experimenter) all giving the same, obviously incorrect response, most of us will answer a very simple question (for example about the length of lines drawn on a sheet of paper) incorrectly.

In the Milgram experiments[10], people are found to conform with instructions from an authority figure, even where this leads them to administer an apparently fatal electric shock to another person. Where the circumstances are varied — for example there are two authority figures who appear to disagree, or where the instructions are received by

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4.   Dutton, D.G. and Aron, A.P. (1974) 'Some Evidence for Heightened Sexual Attraction Under Conditions of High Anxiety, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol 30, no 4, pp510-517.
5.   www.implicit.harvard.edu
6.   Bar-Haim, Y. (2006) 'Nature and Nurture in Own-Race Face Perception', *Psychological Science,* vol 17, no 2, pp 159-163.
7.   Katz, P.A. (1982) 'Development of children's racial awareness and intergroup attitudes', in Katz, L.G. (ed) *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, vol 4, pp17-54.
8.   Green, A.R., Carney, D.R., Pallin, D.J., Ngo, L.H., Raymond, K.L., Iezzoni, L.I. and Banaji, M.R. (2007) 'Implicit Bias among Physicians and its Prediction of Thrombolysis Decisions for Black and White Patients', *Journal of General Internal Medicine,* vol 22, no 9, pp1231–1238.
9.   Asch, S. E. (1951). Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgment. In H. Guetzkow (ed.) *Groups, leadership and men.*
10.   Milgram, Stanley. (1974), *Obedience to Authority; An Experimental View.*

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phone rather than in person — people are less likely to obey. And in the Stanford prison experiment[11], randomly allocated people took on their roles as guard or prisoner in such an extreme way that the experiment had to be ended early.

Another striking demonstration that behaviour is situational is an experiment in which students training to become Christian ministers are sent to give a talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and on the way to the venue are confronted by a stranger in distress[12]. We might expect them to stop and help. But in fact, some do and some don't. Why? They all clearly subscribe to the explicit attitude that it is the right thing to do — they've even had a recent reminder of this by being required to prepare the talk. And 60 per cent of those who have been told that they have plenty of time to reach their destination do stop. But only 10 per cent of those who have been told that they are in a hurry. The situation, is driving the behaviour, not their explicit attitude, even when it has recently been reinforced.

Implicit Drivers in Different Situations

These two factors — implicit associations and the features of the situation — interact.

This can be seen from the results of a series of variations on the 'Good Samaritan' experiment described above[13]. The basic scenario remains the same — students walking across campus are confronted with someone in need of help. What changes is the ethnicity of the stranger in distress, and the precise conditions in which they are found.

In these experiments, Black strangers are treated less favourably than White strangers where the subject perceives the stranger to have caused their own problem, and where it is the stranger themselves who asks for help. By contrast, there is no difference between the treatment of White and Black strangers where the subject perceives the problem to have been externally caused, or where the request for help is from a third party. Also, when non-helping bystanders are present, subjects are significantly slower to help Black strangers than White strangers.

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What we can take from this is that our uneven patterns of implicit associations start to influence our behaviour when it is not clear from the situation what the right thing to do is, or where there is a reason unrelated to race that we can use to justify (to ourselves or others) different behaviour.

Where the stranger seems like an innocent victim, or the subject is asked by a third party to help them, it is very clear what the right thing to do is and there is no readily available excuse not to do it. So, regardless of the ethnicity of the stranger, the subject either helps or doesn't.

Where the damage appears self-inflicted the situation is more nuanced — should the fact that they hold the stranger responsible for their predicament influence how they react? — and the stranger's own call for help is more ambiguous — could it be a trap, perhaps? This lack of clarity in the situation allows people's implicit associations to impact on their decision-making, with the result that more people elect to help White strangers than Black strangers.

Similarly, where there are bystanders who are not helping it is less obvious how the subject should behave — if others are doing nothing, is it really the subject's responsibility? And, as in the Asch experiment, the subject feels pressure to conform to the way that the others are behaving. Again when these factors are present and making the situation more complex, people's implicit associations enter the picture, with the result that more people help White strangers than Black strangers.

As well as producing less favourable outcomes for Black people than for White people, what this means is that we do not experience our behaviour as being related to race. Just as we don't spot the impact of the cup of coffee, or the rope bridge, on our judgement, so we don't spot that the ethnicity of the person in need of help has affected our choice. In our minds there's always another reason — 'it was their fault', 'it was probably a trap', 'it wasn't my problem — the other guys were there first and they didn't help'.

And not only will we not spot that race influenced us, but in any individual situation it will be invisible to an outsider. Our non-race reason will always be good

11. Haney, C., Banks, W. C. and Zimbardo, P. G. (1973). Interpersonal dynamics in a simulated prison. *International Journal of Criminology and Penology,* vol 1, pp69–97.
12. Darley, J. and Batson, C.D. (1973). 'From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and dispositional variables in helping behaviour'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* vol 27, pp100-108.
13. Kunstsman, J.W. and Plant, E.A. (2008), 'Racing to Help: Racial Bias in High Emergency Helping Situations', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 95, pp1499-1510.

enough to satisfy any scrutiny that is applied to a particular decision. It is only when we are able, as we are in these experiments, to analyse patterns of behaviour across large numbers of cases that the difference begins to appear and we can see that race is affecting outcomes.

Self-fulfilling Prophecies

As if this doesn't make the problem of explaining the decision made by the interview panel or the workshop instructor difficult enough, there is a further twist. These decisions do not take place in isolation, but as part of an interaction, as in the interview. In fact in many cases they form part of ongoing patterns of interactions — or relationships — as in the workshop example.

So, just as the panel's assessment of Rick will have been based on his behaviour in the interview, so Rick's behaviour will have been influenced by the panel — and not just by the questions that they asked, but also by the way in which they asked them and the non-verbal features of their communication (which will be driven by their implicit associations, and of which they may themselves be unaware).

The impact of this has been demonstrated in a particularly clever two-part experiment[14]. In the first part, a series of White interviewers were filmed interviewing two candidates, one White and one Black, who — unbeknown to the interviewers — had been trained to use the same content in their answers and to adopt the same behavioural styles. The interaction styles adopted by the interviewers were then analysed.

As we might have predicted from the findings of the IAT, the results were that when interviewing Black candidates the interviewers showed less 'immediate' non-verbal behaviours — these are the behaviours that we display when we feel positive towards someone, such as closer interpersonal distances, more eye contact, more direct shoulder orientation and more forward lean. They interviewed them for shorter periods of time, positioned themselves further away from the candidate, and committed a higher rate of speech errors, such as incomplete sentences, repetitions and stuttering, during the interviews.

In the second part of the experiment, two actors were trained to adopt the two different interaction styles seen in the first part. One actor behaved precisely

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as the interviewers had behaved with White candidates — more immediate non-verbal behaviour etc — whilst the other acted as the interviewers had done with Black candidates first time around.

But this time all the candidates were White. And the camera was on them, and not the interviewers. The result? When White candidates were interviewed in the way that Black candidates had been in the first part, they were judged (by independent viewers of the tapes) to perform more poorly than those who received the same treatment that White candidates had first time around. They were less calm and composed, adopted less immediate interactional styles themselves, and committed more speech errors.

So, my unconscious behaviour can have an impact on the behaviour of others — a process known as behavioural confirmation.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I then witness the behaviour that is adopted in response. But rather than understanding that it has been caused by the situation, I will probably believe that it is typical of the person — or the group to which they belong — what psychologists call fundamental attribution error. This is a well-attested finding — we tend to explain our own behaviour with reference to the situation ('I was late because the Victoria Line was not running') but other people's with reference to their traits, or those of a group ('He's late because he can't get out of bed in the morning' or 'Typical Arsenal supporter — lazy and unreliable').

This will not only reinforce the uneven pattern of associations with which I started. It will also lead me to expect particular types of behaviour from that person or group, and through the process of confirmation bias that we came across earlier, to look only for that type of behaviour. So, even where there is no behavioural confirmation, there can be perceptual confirmation — that is even where my unconscious behaviour does not impact on the behaviour of others, I can become convinced that they are acting as if it has.

The power of this kind of self-fulfilling prophecy is well known. For example it applies when the police question suspects — studies have found that interrogators believing in the guilt of the suspect are able to elicit behaviour assessed by third parties as implying guilt from both guilty and innocent suspects[15].

14. Word, C.O., Zanna, M.P. and Cooper, J. (1974) 'The nonverbal mediation of self-fulfilling prophecies in interracial interaction', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 10 pp109-120.
15. Kassin, S.M., Goldstein, C.C. and Savitsky, K. (2003) 'Behavioural Confirmation in the Interrogation Room: on the dangers of presuming guilt', *Law and Human Behaviour*, vol 27, no 2, pp187-203.

And its capacity to reinforce racial stereotypes is well-documented, for instance in observational studies of 'tableside racism'[16], in which White waiting staff's assumptions that Black customers will be poor tippers leads them to provide inferior service, leading in turn to them receiving poorer tips from Black customers, thereby confirming their assumptions.

Returning to the interview situation, whilst I may be unaware of the effect that my unconscious behaviour is having, it may be more apparent to the interviewee than to me. When Rick says 'they didn't like the look of me', it might just be that he has picked up from the non-verbal communication that he has entered a room where uneven patterns of implicit associations are driving behaviour and judgements in a way that will have a negative impact on him, but of which the panel is unaware.

Or, to add a further level of complexity, the uneven patterns of association in play could be his, rather than — or as well as — the panel's. Members of minority and socially stigmatised groups have been found to hold what the literature calls metastereotypes — assumptions about how they are seen by members of the majority or socially powerful group. These can operate at a conscious or unconscious level. But either way they can act as a self-fulfilling prophecy in just the same way as the unconscious associations of the majority or powerful group. So, experiments find that the higher the expectations of prejudice amongst the minority group member, the more negative is their experience of interaction with a member of the majority group[17]. And metastereotypes may cause the kind of behavioural confirmation that we saw above — if Rick enters the interview believing (consciously or unconsciously) that the panel will be biased against him, confirmation bias may come into play and he may act as if he is receiving the kind of negative non-verbal cues that we saw above, even if in fact he is not.

All this complexity in a single interaction. And so much more when we come to consider ongoing relationships. Patterns of implicit associations will — along with other factors — affect whether or not these relationships get established in the first place and how they develop over time. The amplification spirals of which I wrote in a previous article in this journal[18] are in play. Mr Thompson and Mr Diouf started work in Ray's workshop on the same day. Ray has not consciously set out to relate to them differently, but very different relationships have arisen. Mr Thompson is loud and outgoing and will frequently engage in conversations about the previous night's football or TV. Mr Diouf is very quiet and he tends only to come to Ray with a question about the work. And Ray's response differs. Without knowing it he does not seek out conversations with Mr Diouf, but he does drift over to Mr Thompson's work station to discuss his team's prospects at the weekend. Within a few days Mr Thompson has become Tommo, but even after several weeks Mr Diouf remains Mr Diouf.

In normal circumstances these differences have little impact. But when things go wrong, Ray's decision-making is affected. And probably without him knowing. Tommo is able to invoke his sympathy in a way that Mr Diouf cannot. The chances are that it would not occur to him to think about it — and the question is unlikely ever be asked — but if required to justify the different decisions, he will probably say that Tommo is a good team player and he used his discretion because he didn't want to disrupt the workshop and adversely affect output. Whereas it was important to be firm with Mr Diouf — he needed to learn that the rules are there to be followed and it was important to send a message to other prisoners in the workshop.

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Outcomes Data

This is why the ethnic monitoring of outcomes is so important.

Even if Rick makes a complaint — or Mr Diouf comes to believe that he has been disadvantaged because of his ethnicity and submits a Racist Incident Reporting Form — an investigation into what has happened in these particular instances will not be able to identify the impact of patterns of implicit associations. All that the investigator will be able to do is to hear the accounts of both parties, and in these

16. Rusche, S.E. and Brewster, Z.W. (2008) '"Because they tip for shit!": the social psychology of everyday racism in restaurants', *Sociology Compass*, vol 2, no 6, pp2008-2029.
17. Shelton, J.N., Richeson, J.A. and Salvatore, J. (2005) 'Expecting to be the target of prejudice: Implications for interethnic interactions', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol 31, no 9, pp1189-1202.
18. Barnett-Page, C. (2006) 'Common Sense and Institutional Racism: *Blink* or think', *Prison Service Journal,* no 163.

cases neither party has access to the crucial information, precisely because the patterns of associations that are in play are implicit.

So, to return to our original question, we are not going to be able to explain or understand behaviour in these individual cases without reference to broader trends, and these can be found only if we are collecting and analysing outcomes data by ethnicity.

This is something that has been going on in our prisons for some time now, and we find precisely the trends that the research discussed in this paper would lead us to expect. Black prisoners are significantly more likely than White prisoners to be subject to the use of force, to be segregated for reasons of good order or discipline and to be on the basic level of the privileges scheme. By contrast, in the more formal situation of adjudications for offences against prison discipline, Black prisoners are no more likely than White prisoners to be found guilty.

How can we make prisons fairer? The research in this article would suggest that it will not be by analysing individual cases and trying to find the reasons for the bias, nor by diversity training.

Instead, as individuals we need to become aware of our implicit attitudes and take action to mitigate them in the short term and change them in the long term. Knowing that I might have a bias against a particular candidate in an interview, I can take extra care to ensure that I do not act on it. And over time I can seek out experiences of positive interactions with members of unfamiliar and stigmatised groups. Even surrounding oneself with positive images of minorities has been found to help[19]. And across the organisation we can change the features of the situation that lead implicit biases to drive action by deploying the structured communication tools as is currently being piloted by the Prison Service.

The fact that our behaviour is driven by these unconscious forces does not mean that we are not responsible for it or that we cannot change it. On the contrary, we have the capacity to understand our implicit drivers and the tools to prevent ourselves from acting on them. Only when we do so will we see fair outcomes in prisons.

19. Dasgupta, N. and Greenwald, A.G. (2001) 'On the malleability of implicit attitudes: combating automatic prejudice with images of admired and disliked individuals' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 81, no 5, pp800-814.