Race and Racial Cognition

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Reforming Racial Discourse

- Two main camps on how to reform racial discourse:
  - Race Eliminativism: We should do away with racial categories as they see it as mistaken and oppressive.
  - Race Conservationism: Racial identities/communities are beneficial, as long as we “suitably reform” racial categorization, eliminating the associated prejudices.

- Are either of these views feasible?
- More moderately, race vocabulary can be valuable/necessary to address existing racial inequality and lingering effects of past racism.
Race, Philosophy, and Psychological Research

Thick racialism and Ontological Consensus:

- Late 19th/early 20th centuries were marked by widespread endorsement of racial doctrines, into “natural” categories/kinds. This is *thick racialism*.

- With the advent of modern genetics, it was thought that thick racialism would be confirmed with genetic difference between races. However, this was not the case. Most prominently, the thought that there were genetic features shared by all and only members of a specific race were false.

- *Thin racialism* is still a possibility, however (the idea that racial categorization might be useful in identifying properties that might be useful for epidemiology, medicine, and forensic science). Thin racialism is what will be discussed in the bulk of the paper.
Eliminativism, Conservationism, and Psychology

- Eliminativists: With respect to Race, they want to do away with racial categories altogether.

- K Anthony Appiah: “The truth is that there are no races: there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask ‘race’ to do for us. The evil that is done is done by the concept and by the easy - yet impossible - assumptions as to its application.”
  - Appiah highlights both of the eliminativists’ main points - that thick racism is false, and continued use of racial classification is oppressive.

- Conservationism: View that we should conserve racial categories, albeit while eliminating the associated discrimination from them.
Eliminativism, Conservationism, and Psychology cont’d

- Both eliminativists and conservationists suggest reform of racial categories, but differ in whether to remove or rehabilitate them.

- Eliminativists’ goal: A reduction of racial categorization in thought and behavior.

- Conservationists’ goal: The retention of racial categorization together with a rejection of thick racialism and pernicious racial discrimination.
Normative Proposals, Feasibility, and the Disregard of Psychology

- Costs of normative proposals can come in many forms, e.g. economic, legal, social.
  - Ex. Naomi Zack questions whether racial eliminativism is feasible given First Amendment rights.

- Amongst the various feasibility measures available, however, Psychological feasibility is often overlooked. Though it would seem relevant, many philosophical racial theorists try to focus on categories like history, sociology, and anthropology, despite psychology’s *prima facie* relevance.

- Disregarding psychology in normative racial literature doesn’t seem to hold, as we will demonstrate.
2.1 Racial Categorization and Specialized Cognitive Mechanisms

- Humans classify each other on the basis of physical properties, which are generally racial
  - Assumption that racial properties track biological properties

- Evolutionary theorists’ explanation: “race module’--an evolved cognitive system devoted to race and racial membership” (p. 439)
  - Problem 1: Ancestors had little to no contact with people physically different from themselves
  - Problem 2: Race categories do not lead to important physical, social, psychological, or behavioral generalizations
Evolutionary Psychologists Explanation of Racial Categorization

- “Racial categorization is subserved by a module, but that module in question was initially selected for some other function” (p. 439)

- Disagreement regarding the module’s nature and function
  - How is the module structured?
  - What was the module’s initial purpose?
  - Why do racial properties trigger this module?

- Explanations at odds with evolutionary psychology
  - Socialization explanations
  - Perceptual saliency explanations
  - Group prejudice explanations
Socialization Explanations

- "Children are either explicitly taught to draw the distinctions used in racial categorization, or they easily pick them up from the general social environment" (p. 439)

- Problem 1: Classification based on skin color occurs across cultures
  - Racial categorization can’t be the result of circumstances history of Europe

- Problem 2: There are common elements of racial categorization—(1) basis on phenotypic properties, and (2) mapping racial categories onto biological categories
  - These elements are not a “cultural phenomenon” (p. 441)

- Problem 3: Children do not acquire racial classification tendencies from familial environments
  - Tendencies in categorization are not picked up from one’s environment
Perceptual Saliency Explanations

- “Racial categorization results from the simple fact that people classify a wide variety of objects into categories based on their *perceptually salient* features” (p. 440)

- Problem 1: This does not explain why we categorize on the basis of phenotypic properties
  - “Color is not always intrinsically salient” (p. 442)
    - Example 1: Artifacts
    - Example 2: Children and tools

- Problem 2: “Preschoolers pay attention to people’s race when this information is presented verbally, but not when it is presented visually” (p. 443)
Group Prejudice Explanations

- “Racial categorization and racism are to be accounted for by a general tendency to form *group prejudices* about social groups, be they women, races, or social classes” (p. 440)

- Problem: This does not account for the variance in prejudices associated with different social types
  - “Stereotypes about social groups vary from one group to the next” (p. 442)
    - Example: Political groups vs. races
Evidence Congenial to the Evolutionary Approach

● “Preschoolers expect skin color to be constant over a lifetime, and to be transmitted across generations” (p. 442)
  ○ This is reflective of intuitive essentialism, meaning racial properties are viewed as:
    ▪ stable
    ▪ intrinsic
    ▪ innate
    ▪ inherited

● The operation of the system underlying racial thought is “constant across cultures and shielded from the influence of teaching, it is thought to be canalized” (p. 443)
2.2 Controversies within Evolutionary Psychology

- Hirschfeld: “Racial categorization results from the interaction of an innate, evolved capacity for *folk sociological* thinking, and the specific social structure in which it is operating” (p. 444)

- Kurzban, Tooby, and Cosmides: “Racial categorization results from a cognitive system whose function is to track *coalitions* in a given social environment” (p. 445)

- Gil-White: “Evolution has selected for *an ethnic cognitive system*, that is, for a cognitive system whose evolved function is to identify ethnic groups” (p. 446)
2.3 Consequences for the Debate between Eliminativists and Conservationists

- All eliminativist proposals call for social reform

- According to Hirschfeld’s account, “the feasibility of eliminating racial categories in part turns on the importance of races in people’s social environment, and perhaps the prominence of racial terms in their vocabulary” (p. 447)

- According to Kurzban et al.’s account, “if races continue to act--or seem to act--as coalitions, achieving the ideal of race blindness will be hindered by the fact that putative racial properties like skin color shared by putative coalition members will continue to be salient to our evolved coalitional cognitive system” (p. 447)

- According to Gil-White’s account, “eliminativism might require modifying the cultural structure of society--weakening perceived cultural differences between racial groups” (p. 448)
2.3 Consequences for the Debate between Eliminativists and Conservationists

- “The feasibility of conservationist goals will be directly affected by which psychological view turns out to be correct” (p. 449)

- According to Hirschfeld’s and Gil-White’s accounts, “conserving racial categorization while reforming its normative connotations may be hindered by the nature of the evolved cognitive system that underlies racial categorization” (p. 450)

- According to Kurzban et al.’s account, “the nature of human racial psychology does not prevent in any way the dissociation between racial categorization and its essentialist implications” (p. 450)
Section 3: Racial Evaluation and Implicit Social Cognition

- While eliminativism may seem to be even more hurt by racial categorization, there are still certainly problems that need addressing for conservationism as well, due to its disregard of psychology.

- Recent social psychology studies have shown that those who genuinely believe they are tolerant and free of racial prejudice still showed signs of implicit racial bias.
3.1 Indirect Measure and Implicit Cognition

Nosek: “Indirect measures are measurement methods that (a) avoid requiring introspective access, (b) decrease the mental control available to produce the response, (c) reduce the role of conscious intention, and (d) reduce the role of self-reflective, deliberative processes”.

Examples: Learning someone’s affinity for math or wine - would you ask them or test them if you wanted the most accurate answer?
- Asking them would rely on your trust for them and their trust in their own abilities.
- Testing them would allow them to demonstrate their abilities.
Two Types of Processes

Implicit processes - “operate outside the introspective access and awareness of participants” e.g. you’re not aware that you have a bias toward someone

Automatic processes - “Operate beyond conscious control” e.g. reacting in disgust to someone
The Implicit Association Test (IAT)

Designed to test for association of two dichotomous pairings (e.g. White and Black, or Good and Bad). For skin color images are used, while for good and bad words like ‘joy’, ‘wonderful’, ‘terrible’ and ‘horrible’ are used.

Test subjects press one key for each side of one dichotomy (e.g. ‘e’ for ‘white’ and ‘i’ for ‘black’), and are to sort through them as quickly as possible. Test subjects cannot move on until they have correctly identified each.

If one pairing is faster than the other (e.g. ‘good’ and ‘white’ answered by the same hand), this would suggest there may be a bias present.
Modern Racism Scale

-“The MRS is a direct measure of racial attitudes” (pg 454)
-An MRS is a questionnaire that probes for racial biases and prejudices.

An example question:
“It is easy to understand the anger of Black people in America”
-Participants would be asked whether they strongly agree to strongly disagree.

“The use of direct measures together with indirect measures is important because it is the conjunction of the two that supports the inference to not just automatic but implicit processes and biases”
3.2 Evidence of Biases and their effects

Implicit Racial Bias:

“Participants who profess tolerant or anti-racist views on direct tests often reveal racial biases on indirect tests” (pg 455)

“It is possible to be explicitly racially unbiased while being implicitly racially biased” (pg 455)
3.2 Evidence of Biases and their effects cont.

Implicit Racial Bias and Behavior: An experiment involving fabricated resumes revealed that implicit racial bias do affect our behavior.

“Each resume was constructed around either a very Black-sounding name or a very White-sounding name”

White names received 50% more callbacks for interviews.

White names with more qualified credentials received 30% more callbacks compared to qualified Black names that received a much smaller increase. Other examples: NBA referees, weapon bias
3.2 Evidence of Biases and their effects cont.

Mitigating the Effects of Implicit Racial Bias: “Preliminary evidence suggests that implicit biases can be brought under control...”

There are 3 ways this can be achieved: manipulating the immediate environment, self-control, and blocking the development or acquisition of implicit bias.

Environment: Lowery et al. (2001) found that the implicit biases of White Americans (as measured by the IAT) could be lessened merely by having the participants interact with a Black experimenter rather than a White experimenter.
Mitigating effects

Self-control: Blair et al. (2001) found that participants who generate and focus on counter-stereotypic mental imagery of the relevant exemplars can weaken their IAT effects.

Blocking development or acquisition: Another solution would be to shelter impressionable people (such as young children) from acquiring or developing implicit biases in the first place. However, research raises difficulties for this scenario. Participants of the research were told negative lies about a particular group of people. The researchers then told participants that the negative description of the group of people was a result of a computer error. The explicit bias went away, but the implicit bias remained.
3.3 Consequences for the Debate between Eliminativism and Conservationism

-A large body of evidence clearly indicates that implicit racial biases exist, and are fairly prevalent in the population. They are different from, and can coexist with, their explicit counterparts.
-For conservationists, the broadest conclusion to draw from this is that to the extent that implicit biases have not been systematically taken into account, the feasibility of achieving their professed ideals remains largely unknown.
-Additionally, explicit prejudices have declined steadily over the last several decades while implicit biases remain prevalent and may be more robust. Whatever has been successful in bringing about the drop-off of explicit racial bias does not appear to have eliminated implicit bias. This suggests that not all racial evaluations can be revised and altered by the same methods.
Effects on Conservationism (cont.)

- Two ways that immediately come to mind of achieving the conservationist ideal are by blocking the acquisition or development of biases in younger generations, and by eradicating biases in those persons who are already harboring them.

  - But: initial findings indicate that implicit biases (a) develop quite early, often without benefit of explicit teaching, (b) are easier to acquire than their explicit counterparts, and (c), especially relative to their explicit counterparts, appear difficult to eradicate once acquired.

- It is possible that methods of moralizing (utilizing emotional concepts) could help defeat implicit biases, as moralizing has been successful in driving other changes such as the expansion of vegetarianism and the decrease in smoking. This may be more effective than regular education or rational argument.
Effects on Conservationism (cont.)

-On the other hand, conservationists might abandon the idea of complete eradication of both implicit and explicit bias, and instead embrace a more pragmatic goal of eradication of explicit bias, together with some agenda of controlling or mitigating the expression of implicit biases
- Implicit biases are not immune from influencing, so methods could be used to bring them under control and minimize their impact, though proposals along these lines are currently vague and need to be made more specific before any concrete analysis can be done
  - These proposals can range from changing the social environment to finding more effective methods of self control
Further Work to be Done

a) the extent to which many of the results reported can be generalized from one culture to the next remains uncertain, as does the manner in which those results might be generalized
(b) whether and which results can be generalized to racial groups beyond Blacks and Whites within a single culture (to include other putative racial group such as Hispanics, Indians, Asians, etc.) is also uncertain
(c) there is little systematic data concerning the ontogenesis of implicit racial biases
(d) a more detailed account of the cognitive architecture underlying these implicit biases is needed, preferably one that can shed light on the admittedly live issue of how and how often the evaluations measured by the indirect tests are also involved in causal processes that lead to actual judgment and action
Further Work (cont.)

(e) it is currently far from clear whether implicit biases of different types, for instance implicit racial biases, gender biases, age biases, disability biases, etc., all reflect the workings of the same set of cognitive mechanisms

(f) more fine-grained and theoretically motivated distinctions are needed, since the term “group” used to interpret much of the data is probably too ambiguous to be of much serious use—as alluded to in Section 2, different sorts of groups, for instance coalitions, ethnies, families, political parties, or even professions may be cognized differently by distinct systems in the human mind.
Conclusion

- The philosophical debate makes normative claims about racial categorization in society and in individual thought.
- The feasibility of the philosophical positions, then, must be taken into account (despite any appeal, if one position is impossible to implement, normative claims towards reforms in that way will be ineffective).
- Psychological mechanisms, despite being largely ignored by the literature up to this point, must be considered in the philosophical debate to meaningfully reform racial categorization, as psychological research will bear on the feasibility of implementing proposals based on eliminativism and conservationism.