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Bias in Context: Psychological and Structural Explanations of Injustice Introduction to the Symposium

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Abstract

None required.

Acknowledgements

This symposium highlights selected work from a conference series—Bias in Context, which ran from 2016 to 2017. We would like to thank the many generous sponsors of the events: the University of Sheffield philosophy department, the University of Utah College of Humanities and Philosophy Department, the California State Polytechnic University at Pomona College of Humanities and Philosophy Department, the Mind Association, SWIP-UK, the Analysis Trust, and the Society for Applied Philosophy. We extend a special thanks to the Journal of Applied Philosophy for hosting this symposium.

For over a century, activists and theorists have decried the role of prejudice and stereotyping in the creation—and sustenance—of group oppression. In an 1892 editorial, Ida B. Wells argued that white lynch mobs and their defenders seemed to believe that all black folks were “criminal, ignorant, and bestial.”¹ After World World II, psychologists like Gordon Allport and others offered a similar view of prejudice and its role in making atrocities like the Holocaust possible.² In liberation movements of the mid-to-late 20th century, feminists and anti-colonial theorists likewise critiqued stereotyping and prejudice as part of their push for social equality and political self-determination.³ “My true wish,” writes Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “is to get my brother, black or white, to shake off the dust from that lamentable livery built up over centuries of incomprehension.”⁴ “Shaking off the dust” requires, in part, freeing one’s heart and mind from biases.

But how easy is it to do this, and how significant are these personal, psychological transformations to ending injustices? In the 1990s and early 2000s, psychologists increasingly began to argue that social biases had gone “underground” in our psychologies, and were therefore both widespread and particularly difficult to root out.⁵ They referred to these biases as “implicit.” While there is no uncontroversial understanding of implicit biases, they are generally understood as widely shared automatic patterns of cognition or affect that can operate without the agent’s awareness, and that are difficult to bring under the agent’s control.⁶ Particular attention has been given to the explanatory role of implicit biases in persistent social injustices. Within philosophy, some authors focused in particular on how research on implicit bias could inform our understanding of inequities and marginalization in academic philosophy.⁷ It was argued that implicit biases might be part of the explanation for the under-representation of women and people of colour in postgraduate communities, in

tenured positions; and of their work on reading lists, in anthologies and at conferences. Thus implicit bias was posited as an important cause of discrimination and exclusion, capable of explaining why social inequality could persist even in the absence of ill-will and explicit prejudice.⁸ Interventions targeting these aspects of our psychologies were thought to be part of any strategy for tackling injustice.⁹

Yet there are many objections to explaining injustice via prejudice, qua psychological feature of agents, and implicit bias in particular. Some have worried that attention to the role of psychological factors obscures the real causes of injustice, which are structural in nature.¹⁰ Others vouched for the importance of psychological explanations but argued that implicit bias theorists downplayed the existence of explicit racism, sexism, and homophobia in the 21st century and ignored the growing threat of far-right social movements.¹¹ Yet others argued that the scientific quality of the research was questionable and was not sufficiently predictive of real-world behaviour.¹²

In 2016 and 2017, we—along with Alex Madva—hosted a series of four workshops¹³ to evaluate and scrutinize these critiques, and articulate the prospects for attempts to understand the role of psychology in group oppression. The conferences were interdisciplinary events, aimed at bringing together activists, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers and philosophers working on issues related to bias, discrimination and group oppression. Work presented at the events addressed a range of related questions, for example: what is the relationship between psychological and structural explanations of persistent injustice? Must we prioritize one kind of explanation over the other? Or, are there ways of integrating these two types of explanation to provide a better understanding of how injustices emerge and persist over time? Should strategies for tackling injustices focus on structures rather than individuals and their cognitions, or is there a role for psychological interventions too? More radically, is it even worth talking about *implicit* bias anymore, given the salience of explicit racism, sexism, transphobia, and other explicit forms of prejudice in today's world?

This symposium provides a brief snapshot into the conference series, as well as larger discussions among theorists of injustice about these questions.

The first article—Gabiella Beckles-Raymond's "Implicit Bias, (Global) White Ignorance and Bad Faith"—provides a challenge to implicit bias research, bringing the literature on implicit bias into contact with work of critical race theorists.¹⁴ On her view, implicit bias research cannot adequately explain the persistence of social injustice, and racism in particular. This is because implicit bias explanations fail to emphasize the motivational components and identity commitments that underpin resistance to racial equality. Thus, according to implicit bias explanations, institutional racism happens by accident, an unhappy result of unintentional, unconscious attitudes. In reality, she notes, individuals within power structures are motivated to protect white interests quite explicitly, and they cultivate racial ignorance. Drawing on the work of Charles Mills, Beckles-Raymond characterizes this ignorance as an active, habitual disposition and one that is designed to protect whites' collective interests.¹⁵ Extending the analysis, she then looks at how implicit bias discourse

functions in actual historical context. Citing examples from recent political discourse, she persuasively argues that implicit bias explanations in their simplest form manifest a kind of “bad faith.” Building on the work of Lewis Gordon, Beckles-Raymond argues that the attitude of bad faith consists in a willingness to hide the truth of how white supremacy functions, from both oneself and others.¹⁶ Likewise, implicit bias explanations let people off the hook too easily, relieving white folks in particular of responsibility for their complicity in social injustice.

One might conclude that Beckles-Raymond has provided reasons to give up on implicit bias explanations and, perhaps, psychological explanations of injustice altogether. On her view, structural explanations of injustice reveal the workings of injustice more effectively and honestly. So they should take precedence over, and could perhaps be deployed in lieu of, psychological explanations. For those who seek to maintain there is value in implicit bias explanations, the piece provides a powerful challenge: explanations framed in terms of individual psychology must capture the motivated dimensions of biases, and avoid formulating such explanations in ways that manifest bad faith and absolve individuals too easily from responsibility for social injustice.

The symposium’s second article—Lacey Davidson and Daniel Kelly’s “Minding the Gap: Bias, Soft Structures, and the Double Life of Social Norms”—takes up issues raised by Beckles-Raymond about the role of individual psychologies in oppressive social structures.¹⁷ Davidson and Kelly begin by highlighting the differences between psychological and structural approaches to injustice. Very often these approaches are framed as competitors. If so, one kind of explanation necessarily takes precedence over the other. Davidson and Kelly recommend that theorists stop arguing about which approach takes priority and instead focus on how psychological and structural approaches could be better integrated.

To illustrate why an integrative approach is necessary, they use Charlotte Witt’s research on norms and gender.¹⁸ Witt argues that the best analysis of social injustice will be structural in nature. Yet Witt’s account has “a gap,” if they are right. It lacks an explanation of how gender norms are internalized. Drawing on empirical research, Davidson and Kelly argue that human minds feature a built-in “norm system” that allows individuals to soak up rules about how the social world operates and understand their “proper” place in it. When individuals internalize social norms, Davidson and Kelly argue, they are in effect internalizing a part of social structures. Social norms thus lead a kind of “double life,” both within and beyond individuals. Drawing on this insight, Davidson and Kelly reject the explanatory sidelining of individual psychology. Individual psychology is not something separate from social structures but is one medium through which “soft” social structures manifest and become part of individuals. Any adequate explanation of how oppression functions—and how to address its negative impacts—must therefore take psychology into account. Moving forward, they suggest that empirical research on disrupting social norms unlocks promising strategies for change.

The account provided by Davidson and Kelly is just one example of an approach that integrates psychological and structural explanations, giving them equal significance. During the conference series, other scholars provided alternative integrative explanations. Though not all this work appears in this symposium, it is worth highlighting some of it here. Sociologists Glenn Bracey and Jennifer Mueller, for example, introduced conference participants to empirical work on white ignorance¹⁹ and segregation in white-dominant, evangelical churches.²⁰ They argued for the necessity of first-person, phenomenological approaches in understanding the mechanisms at play. Purely structural approaches, Bracey and Mueller contended, are incomplete because they hide the ways in which white people actively and creatively perpetuate racial hierarchies. In a similar vein, Robin Zheng argued that activists cannot effectively do their jobs by appealing only to structural accounts of racism and sexism.²¹ If individuals are not able to see the ways in which they are personally implicated in injustices, Zheng explained, they cannot be persuaded to take collective responsibility for these injustices. Each of these accounts also suggests a different (and not necessarily exclusive) approach to interventions to address injustices: focused on disrupting or challenging social norms; making visible one's own complicity in unjust hierarchies, and taking collective responsibility for bringing about change. A criteria one might bring to bear on these various accounts is whether they each avoid the issues raised by Beckles-Raymond: do they accommodate and address the motivational components and identity commitments that underpin resistance to change?

The third article in this symposium—Alex Madva's "Integration, Community, and the Medical Model of Social Injustice"—further presses ameliorative concerns.²² Madva intervenes in a historically-prominent debate in the United States about racial injustice. He notes two broad schools of thought. According to advocates of racial integration, we ought to agitate for social policies that promote racially and ethnically mixed social spaces, including schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods because this is the best way to promote racial equality. According to advocates of community development, activists and policy makers should instead focus on "lifting up communities of color" by investing resources in them. Madva argues that advocates of both schools of thought—including Elizabeth Anderson²³ and Tommie Shelby²⁴, respectively—offer "unempirical" defences of their proposals and overstate the case for them. If he is right, "an empirical mindset" suggests that we ought to "diversify our portfolio" of interventions and be willing to go back to the drawing board when they do not work. Madva also argues that theorists on both sides understate the importance of prejudice reduction in making structural reforms possible. "Whichever structural reforms we prioritize," he writes, "changing individuals' racial attitudes will likely be integral to . . . enabling productive moral conversation, fair resource redistribution, ghetto revitalisation, and the integration of neighbourhoods, schools, and jobs."²⁵ This dovetails with Madva's view—for which he argues elsewhere—that we must give equal significance to social structures and individuals, both in our explanations of injustice and in social interventions meant to combat injustice.²⁶

We hope readers will appreciate this introduction to a very exciting debate, which reaches beyond the boundaries of philosophy into social science, psychology, the law, and social activism. The debate is of course an iteration of a conversation with a venerable historical lineage. Marxists, critical race theorists, feminists and queer philosophers, and disability rights theorists—as well as theorists and activists with overlapping, intersectional

commitments—have long argued about how best to explain and disrupt persistent social injustices, including racial and gender oppression. One new feature of the current debate is the focus on implicit bias. Our hope in organizing the conference series was to spark debate and publicize new research that engaged these issues—not just as they relate to implicit bias but about psychological markers of injustice more generally—in a critical, empirically-informed, and innovative manner. The results so far have been productive, and we look forward to continuing the conversation.²⁷

NOTES

¹ Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader* (New York: Penguin Classics 2014), pp. 54.

² Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

³ Cherríe Moraga & Gloria Andalzúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th edition (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015/1981).

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008/1952), pp. xvi.

⁵ Mahzarin Banaji, Curtis Hardin, & Alexander Rothman, ‘Implicit stereotyping in person judgment,’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 65, 2 (1993): 272-281; Mahzarin Banaji & Curtis Hardin, ‘Automatic stereotyping,’ *Psychological Science*, 7, 3 (1996): 136–141; John Bargh, ‘The cognitive monster: the case against the controllability of automatic stereotype effects,’ in Chaiken & Trope (eds.) *Dual Process Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), pp. 361–382; Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Brian Nosek, Mahzarin Banaji, & Anthony Greenwald, ‘Harvesting intergroup implicit attitudes and beliefs from a demonstration website,’ *Group Dynamics*, 6, 1 (2002): 101–115.

⁶ Recent research shows that many people are capable of reliably predicting their IAT scores, thus implicit biases do not fly completely under the radar of consciousness. If so, line between “explicit” and “implicit” biases becomes fuzzier. For discussion of the empirical research, see Jules Holroyd, ‘Implicit bias, awareness and imperfect cognitions’ in *Consciousness and Cognition*, 33 (2015): 511-523; Alex Madva, ‘Implicit bias, moods, and moral responsibility,’ *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 99, 1 (2018): 53-78.

⁷ Sally Haslanger, ‘Changing the ideology and culture of philosophy: not by reason (alone),’ *Hypatia*, 23, 2 (2009): 210-223; Louise Anthony, ‘Different voices or perfect storm: why are there so few women in philosophy?’ *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 43, 3 (2012): 227-255. doi:[10.1111/j.1467-9833.2012.01567.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9833.2012.01567.x); Jennifer Saul, ‘Implicit bias, stereotype threat and

women in philosophy' in F. Jenkins & K. Hutchison (eds.) *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 39-60.

⁸ Michael Brownstein & Jennifer Saul (eds.), *Implicit Bias & Philosophy: Volume 1, Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); *Implicit Bias and Philosophy: Volume 2, Moral Responsibility, Structural Injustice, and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Early empirical research focused on strategies for manipulating our cognitions and feelings to reduce individual biases. For discussion of one strategy and its effectiveness, see Peter Gollwitzer & Paschal Sheeran, 'Implementation intentions and goal achievement: a meta-analysis of effects and processes,' *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38 (2006): 69–119.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Saray Ayala, 'Speech affordances: a structural take on how much we can do with our words,' *European Journal of Philosophy*, 24, 4 (2016): 879–891; Sally Haslanger, 'Social structure, narrative, and explanation,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 45, 1 (2015): 1–15.

¹¹ Helen Lauer, 'Implicitly racist epistemology: recent philosophical appeals to the neurophysiology of tacit prejudice,' *Angelaki*, 24, 2 (2019): 34–47.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2019.1574076>

¹² Frederick Oswald, Gregory Mitchell, Hart Blanton, James Jaccard, & Philip Tetlock, 'Predicting ethnic and racial discrimination: a meta-analysis of IAT criterion studies,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105, 2 (2013): 171–192.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032734>; Sean Hermanson, 'Implicit bias, stereotype threat, and political correctness in philosophy,' *Philosophies*, 2, 2 (2017):1-17.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies2020012>; Jesse Singal, 'Psychology's favorite tool for measuring racism isn't up to the job,' *Science of Us, New York Magazine*, 2017.
<https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/psychologys-racism-measuring-tool-isnt-up-to-the-job.html>.
For response to these criticisms, see Alex Madva, Michael Brownstein, & Bertram Gawronski, 'Implicit bias: putting the criticism into perspective,' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming). A related, adjacent criticism is that individuals' test results on the IAT are not temporally stable. So it may be that IAT (Implicit Association Test) tracks ephemeral effects of situations, rather than stable features of individuals' attitudes. For further discussion, see Madva, Brownstein, & Gawronski, op. cit.; Keith Payne, Heidi Vuletich, & Kristjen Lundberg, 'Flipping the script on implicit bias research with the bias of crowds,' *Psychological Inquiry*, 28, 4 (2107): 306-311; Jules Holroyd & Jennifer Saul, 'Implicit bias and reform efforts in philosophy: a defence,' *Philosophical Topics, Special Issue on Misogyny and its Intersections*, eds. K. Manne & B. Takaoka, (forthcoming).

¹³ Full programs for the event can be found here: <https://philevents.org/event/show/22602> (Conference 1, May 2016, Cal Poly); <https://biasincontext.weebly.com/> (Conference 2, September 2016, Sheffield); <https://biasincontext3.weebly.com/programme.html> (Conference

3, January 2017, Sheffield); <http://biasincontext4.weebly.com/> (Conference 4, October 2017, Utah).

¹⁴ Gabriella Beckles-Raymond. 'Implicit bias, (global) white ignorance, and bad faith: the problem of whiteness and anti-black racism,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (published online in Early View, 16 August 2019).
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/japp.12385>

¹⁵ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995).

¹⁷ Lacey Davidson & Daniel Kelly, 'Minding the gap: bias, soft social structures, and the double life of social norms,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, (published online in Early View, 23 December 2018). doi: 10.1111/japp.12351

¹⁸ Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2011).

¹⁹ Jennifer Mueller, 'Racial ideology or racial ignorance? An alternative theory of racial cognition,' manuscript.

²⁰ Glenn Bracey & Wendy Leo Moore, "'Race tests': racial boundary maintenance in white evangelical churches,' *Sociological Inquiry*, 87, 2 (2017): 282-302.

²¹ Robin Zheng, 'Bias, structure, and injustice: a response to Haslanger,' *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly*, 4, 1 (2018): 1-29.

²² Alex Madva, 'Integration, community, and the medical model of social injustice,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, (published online in Early View, 27 February 2019). doi: 10.1111/japp.12356

²³ Anderson, op. cit.

²⁴ Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Madva, 'Integration, community, and the medical model,' 18.

²⁶ Alex Madva, 'A plea for anti-anti individualism: how oversimple psychology misleads social policy,' *Ergo*, 27, 3 (2016): 701-728.

²⁷ For example, see Erin Beeghly & Alex Madva (eds.), *An Introduction to Implicit Bias: Knowledge, Justice, and the Social Mind* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming). Authors in this edited volume—many of whom were conference participants—further engage with the empirical and philosophical issues mentioned in this symposium.
