Who Do You Think You Are?

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By Shilpa Banerji

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Images of Jackie Robinson, Zora Neale Hurston and several other people of color float across the computer screen of Dr. Mahzarin R. Banaji. While all the images are of admirable icons, their purpose is more than mere motivation. The Harvard University psychology and social ethics professor is using this Black and Brown mosaic to help dispel her subconscious biases. Banaji has made a career of showing people what they really think, starting with herself.

Born and raised in India, racial and ethnic bias have been present in her life from the beginning, but her scientific study of bias began in earnest almost a decade ago. As a professor of social and cognitive psychology at Yale University, Banaji was conducting research on how social attitudes are affected by unconscious thoughts. Some studies at the time indicated that even amnesiacs, who had suffered severe memory loss, still possessed memories, they were just unable to access them. That scientific revelation led Banaji to wonder if our social attitudes operated in a similar way.

“You don’t have to be an amnesiac to show those signs,” she says. “Maybe all of us have another side to ourselves that we don’t have access to.”

To help answer the question, Banaji teamed up with fellow psychology professors Dr. Anthony Greenwald of the University of Washington and Dr. Brian Nosek of the University of Virginia to develop the Implicit Association Test. The IAT was created as a tool to examine thoughts and feelings that exist either outside of conscious awareness or outside of conscious control. In essence, the test uncovers subconscious preferences. For people who consider themselves fair-minded and objective, the results of the IAT can be unsettling and unexpected, as Banaji found out when she took it for the first time. She was shocked to discover how many biases existed within her subconscious.

“For a moment, I had a feeling everything was draining out from me,” she says. “But then the scientist in me came back ... to ask more questions.”

As a woman of color, the race-bias test she helped develop served as a stark reality check. “Becoming aware changed me in some very deep ways, and I thought I was already pretty aware,” she says.

What IAT Measures

Humans are faced with countless social situations daily. Psychology students learn early on that generalizations and categorizations are effective yet flawed ways of navigating life’s social maze. But those shortcuts — accurate or not — can easily become ingrained biases. Are Middle-Eastern men at the airport interpreted as a threat? Are young Black or Latino men in a group considered a gang? Are the elderly and teenagers perceived as untrustworthy behind the wheel? The examples are limitless. And for the most part, we don’t even recognize them on a conscious level.

But the IAT brings those latent prejudices to the forefront, and it does not necessarily paint a pretty picture. Since it went online, says Nosek, more than three million people have taken the test. More than 80 percent of White respondents have shown a pro-White bias. But interestingly, 50 percent of Blacks show an anti-Black bias.

“There’s a two-punch story with Blacks. First, they do show their bias themselves, but they don’t show it to nearly the same extent as Whites do,” Banaji says.

The test may be “in your face” she says, “But the IAT is not just about what we see in other people. It is about what we see in ourselves.

“We know that, as members of groups, we perform enormous acts of kindness. We do things for our family, we root for our school teams, we come to school and work for lots of people besides ourselves,” she says. “What is interesting is that that same identity, with the group, also has an ugly side.”

Dr. Mahzarin R. Banaji

Hometown: Hyderabad, India

Title: Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the Department of Psychology at Harvard, and Carol K. Pforzheimer Professor at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

Education: B.A., English, Philosophy, Psychology, Nizam College, Hyderabad, India, 1976; M.A., General Psychology, Osmania University, Hyderabad, India, 1978; M.Phil. program, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, 1980; M.A., Psychology, The Ohio State University, 1982; Ph.D., Social Psychology, The Ohio State University, 1986

Selected Awards: American Association of University Women International Fellowship (1980); Lily Foundation Fellowship (1986); Lex Hixon ’63 Prize for Teaching Excellence (1991); Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship (1997); Gordon Allport Prize for Intergroup Relations (2000)
The Implicit Association Test

Developed by Dr. Anthony G. Greenwald, University of Washington, with Dr. Mahzarin R. Banaji, Harvard University and Dr. Brian Nosek, University of Virginia.

In the IAT, a subject responds to a series of items that are classified into four categories — typically, two representing a concept — discrimination such as flowers versus insects, and two representing an attribute such as pleasant versus unpleasant. Subjects are asked to respond rapidly with a right-hand key press to items representing one concept and one attribute (e.g., insects and pleasant), and with a left-hand key press to items from the remaining two categories (e.g., flowers and unpleasant). Subjects then perform a second task in which the key assignments for one of the pairs are switched (for example, flowers and pleasant share a response, likewise insects and unpleasant). The IAT measures the time delay associated with each task. These measures are interpreted in terms of association strengths by assuming that subjects respond more rapidly when the concept and attribute are strongly associated (flowers and pleasant) than when they are weakly associated (insects and pleasant).

You can assess your conscious and unconscious preferences for more than 90 different topics ranging from pets to political issues, ethnic groups to sports teams, and entertainers to styles of music. The test can be taken online at: [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/).

SOURCE: Dr. Anthony G. Greenwald

professor and co-founder of Racetalks Initiatives, participated in the seminar. She notes that, “Just articulating biases and trying to decrease them is not enough. Bias is a more collaborative process.”

In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Grutter v. Bollinger decision, which validated affirmative action policies at the University of Michigan, Banaji believes the IAT could play a role in college admissions. In an upcoming paper, she states that “attitudes predict behavior and suggest that ‘colorblind’ legislation, such as Proposition 209, does not necessarily result in colorblind decision-making, whereas affirmative action measures can serve to correct race bias.”

Says Banaji, “The [IAT] experience lets you understand the unevenness of the playing field in a very direct, concrete, objective way.”

A LIFELONG LENS

Growing up in Hyderabad, India, Banaji says her environment and culture did little to shelter her from prejudice.

“India is a country brimming with biases, except perhaps people talk about it more explicitly,” she says. Banaji is a Parsi — one of India’s smallest minority groups. The Parsis originally migrated from Iran and are not part of India’s caste system. “But in a way, I was protected, so I could view the majority from a different perspective and see certain inequalities more easily,” she says.

As a teenager, Banaji had planned to become a secretary, but she chose instead to enroll in Nizam College in Hyderabad with her sister. The two were the first women in the family to attend college, where Banaji was a standout student, earning an international fellowship. She decided to use that fellowship to attend The Ohio State University after reading the Handbook of Social Psychology during a train ride from New Delhi.

STARTING YOUNG

Banaji’s current research, conducted alongside doctoral student Yarrow Dunham, suggests that children as young as three years old show bias levels on par with adults.

In the study, a group of 145 non-Black children (ages 3 to 13) were presented with pictures of racially ambiguous angry faces. The faces were more likely to be classified as Black than the same faces when presented with happy expressions. The results of the experiment support a common stereotypical association between Blacks and anger.

“Our conscious attitudes are malleable,” Banaji says. “They are malleable as a function of what our culture tells us is right and wrong, and we are practicing that every day.”

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