Pro-White Implicit Bias Declined during the Black Lives Matter Movement

Jeremy E. Sawyer
Assistant Professor of Psychology
Kingsborough Community College, CUNY

Anup Gampa
Postdoctoral Scholar, New York University - Shanghai
What are implicit attitudes?

• Automatic emotional evaluations (positive/negative) or associations with a person or group

• People can harbor implicit biases against social groups without explicitly endorsing them (Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011).

• For instance, negative associations regarding Blacks may be activated even if this contrasts with explicit attitudes (Devine, 1989).
Why are implicit attitudes important?

• Implicit racial bias predicts negative interracial contact and discrimination in hiring, housing, and education (Staats et al., 2015).

• Recent meta-analysis found implicit bias predicted biased intergroup behavior ($r = .37$ in well-designed studies; Kurdi et al., 2018)

• Counties in which Whites hold greater implicit and explicit bias show increased Black/White disparities in birth weight (Orchard & Price, 2017), health care access, and health outcomes (Leitner et al., 2016).
The Implicit Attitudes Test (IAT-Race)
Are implicit racial attitudes resistant to change?

• There is little evidence for lab-based interventions that reduce implicit bias for longer than a single lab session.

• Even nine effective short-term lab interventions (e.g., counter-stereotypical exemplars, priming multiculturalism) showed no lasting changes after a couple days (Lai et al., 2016).

• Authors concluded that racial prejudice remains steadfast, possibly because racially biased messages are so pervasive in U.S. society.
Even Obama had little impact

• Exposure to high-status Black exemplars like Obama has also proven ineffective in shifting societal-level racial attitudes.

• Across U.S., implicit and explicit attitudes did not change during Obama’s campaign, nor during his presidency (Schmidt & Axt, 2016).
What about social movements?

• Antiracist social movements offer a societal alternative for reducing bias.

• The Civil Rights movement changed explicit racial attitudes (Condran, 1979).

• Black Lives Matter (BLM) asserts Blacks should have equal value to non-Blacks.

**Question:**

• How did BLM impact bias in the U.S.?
How might social movements change implicit attitudes?

• Associative-propositional evaluation (APE) model (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2014) suggests exemplars like Obama may activate associations (e.g., powerful, accomplished) that temporarily influence evaluations of Blacks, but do not generalize.

• In contrast, a movement connecting Blacks in general with positive images, discourse (“Black Lives Matter”), and traits (courageous, agentic) may alter associations more widely.
How might social movements change implicit attitudes?

• Against pervasive narratives of Blacks as criminals, BLM shows Blacks to be targets of racism and police brutality who are fighting for justice.

• Hearing people voice opinions humanizes them – even if the opinion is not currently shared by those hearing it (Schroeder et al., 2017).

• Possibility of creating a common ingroup identity (antiracists) for both Blacks and Whites, which evidence suggests can reduces bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).
How might social movements change explicit attitudes?

• By catalyzing political discussion and persuasive arguments about the value of Black lives and virtues of struggling against racism.

• Changes in implicit attitudes can trigger changes in explicit attitudes, and vice versa (APE model) – both may occur in social movements.

• BLM raises hope. Increased efficacy to reduce racial inequality spurs Whites’ antiracist action and is linked to more positive explicit racial attitudes toward Blacks (Stewart et al., 2010).
Method

• To investigate potential effects of BLM on racial attitudes in the U.S., we examined the IAT Race scores of 1,369,204 participants on Project Implicit website from 2009 to 2016.
  • [https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/)

• We examined implicit/explicit attitudes before BLM began in 2013, during BLM (2013-2016), and during its highest points of struggle.

• We investigated the the long-term influence of BLM as well as short-term impacts of BLM high points of activism.
Seven Highest BLM Periods – based on history and media citations

1. Acquittal of G. Zimmerman in killing of Trayvon Martin (July 6-Aug 2, 2013)
2. Uprising in Ferguson, MO after killing of Michael Brown (Aug 9-Sept 5, 2014)
3. Protests of non-indictments of police in killings of Michael Brown & Eric Garner (Nov 22-Dec 27, 2014)
6. BLM disruptions of presidential election events, subsequent Democratic National Committee (DNC) resolution on BLM (Aug 8-Sept 5, 2015)
Results

After controlling for any shifts in participant demographics over time, implicit attitudes were:

1. Less pro-White during BLM than pre-BLM
2. Increasingly less pro-White across BLM
3. Less pro-White during most periods of high BLM struggle (compared with the previous 30 days)
Results

• In terms of explicit racial attitudes:
  • Whites became less explicitly pro-White during BLM
  • Blacks became less explicitly pro-Black during BLM
  • Each group moved toward an egalitarian “no racial preference” position.
Pre-BLM to BLM change
Regression Discontinuity Analysis
Results by Political Orientation

• Was there a “backlash” to among conservatives to BLM, especially given counter movements such as All Lives/Blue Lives Matter?

• We found that reductions in pro-White/anti-Black bias occurred across the political spectrum, but were larger among liberal participants ($d = .11$) than conservatives ($d = .04$).

• In terms of explicit racial attitudes, Whites became less pro-White and Blacks became less pro-Black during BLM, each moving toward an egalitarian “no preference” position.
Discussion

• Converging evidence from multiple analyses here suggests that pro-White implicit bias decreased during BLM and its high points.

• This study offers the first evidence directly connecting a social movement to societal-level changes in implicit/explicit attitudes.

• Although effect sizes are small (d’s around .1), such effects across many individuals can represent shifts in attitudes with impacts on discrimination that are societally meaningful (Greenwald et al., 2015).

• Did the Civil Rights Movement have a larger impact on attitudes? If so, might this be related to the sweeping structural reforms it won (e.g. legal desegregation, voting rights)?
Future directions

• Antiracist mass social movements offer a potential alternative for reducing societal-level racial bias that has been virtually unexplored.

• Does this generalize to other biases (e.g., anti-LGBT biases) and the social movements fighting those biases (LGBT rights movement)?

• Social movements may change attitudes through both conscious and associational mechanisms, by redefining ingroup identities (antiracists of all races), and enhancing our efficacy to collectively resist racism.