

Spotlight on Research: Is Racism on the Decline in America?

July 01, 1996

Has racism declined as much as surveys indicate? The research of John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner, both APS Fellows, and their colleagues at Colgate University and the University of Delaware has explored how racism has evolved over the past 20 years into more subtle and perhaps more insidious forms. Their work, which has been supported in part by a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), has examined one prevalent type of this modern, subtle form of bias- aversive racism. Aversive racism is characteristic of many White Americans who possess strong egalitarian values and who believe that they are not prejudiced. But many also possess negative feelings and beliefs of which they are either unaware or try to dissociate from their images of themselves as being non-prejudiced.

These negative feelings may be rooted in common cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural forces that can affect most White Americans. The convictions of fairness, justice, and equality, along with the almost unavoidable development of racial biases, form the basis of the ambivalence that aversive racists experience.

Historical Perspective

Research psychologists have long studied race relations in America. The thrust of this work largely has been to understand the nature of Whites' prejudice toward people of color (mainly toward Blacks) and to explore how interracial contact situations can be structured to reduce this prejudice. Over the past three decades, nationwide surveys have documented significant declines in expressions of prejudice, negative stereotyping, and resistance to equality by Whites.

Nevertheless, substantial gaps in social, economic, and physical well-being between Blacks and Whites persist, and in some cases are growing. Blacks continue to report greater distrust of our social system and of other people than do Whites.

For example, in one nationwide survey, only 16% of Blacks (compared to 44% of Whites) felt that "most people can be trusted." These data challenge the assumption that race is no longer a critical issue for our society.

Indirect Discrimination

This ambivalence produces more subtle and indirect manifestations of discrimination than more traditional, overt forms of prejudice. Unlike the consistent pattern of discrimination that might be expected from people who display racism overtly (i.e., "old-fashioned racists"), whether aversive racists discriminate against Blacks depends largely on the situation.

Because aversive racists consciously endorse egalitarian values, they do not discriminate against Blacks in situations in which discrimination would be obvious to others and themselves. However, they do

discriminate in situations in which appropriate (and thus inappropriate) behavior is not obvious or when an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race. For example, in one study of helping in an emergency, White bystanders were as likely to help a Black victim as White victim when they were the only witness to an emergency and their personal responsibility was clear. In a condition in which the bystanders believed that there were other witnesses to the emergency and they could justify not helping on the belief that someone else would intervene, Whites helped the Black victim half as often as they helped the White victim. Bias was expressed but in a way that could be justified on the basis on a non-race-related reason- the belief that someone else would help.

In a recent invited address at the Eastern Psychological Association, Dovidio argued that aversive racism may contribute to the distrust that Blacks have toward people in general and to Whites in particular. In a recent study of simulated juridic judgments in which White participants made recommendations for the death penalty in a murder case, participants who scored high on a prejudice scale made significantly stronger recommendations for capital sentencing for Black defendants than for White defendants, even though the facts in the case were identical. Dovidio suggests that this overt form of discrimination can justifiably breed racial mistrust. Participants who scored low in prejudice, on the other hand, showed a different pattern of results. They did not discriminate against the Black defendant when there was a possibility that their action would be seen as racially motivated. But, when racial bias could be discounted as a motivation in a condition in which a Black juror advocated the death penalty for the Black defendant, low-prejudice-scoring Whites showed the same pattern of discrimination that was evidenced by high-prejudice-scoring Whites. This seemingly inconsistent pattern of response by Whites who say they are not biased-sometimes discriminating against Blacks and sometimes not—can also contribute to the distrust of Whites by Blacks.

Because self-report measures of prejudice are susceptible to conscious efforts to appear unbiased, they may not be effective at distinguishing aversive racists (people who consciously subscribe to non-prejudiced ideals but have unconscious negative feelings) from truly non-prejudiced Whites. Dovidio proposes that alternative techniques are needed. Recent studies by Dovidio, Gaertner, and their colleagues, along with independent programs of research by Russell Fazio at Indiana University, Patricia Devine at the University of Wisconsin, Marzu Banaji at Yale University, and Chick Judd and Bernadette Park at the University of Colorado, have focused on using “priming” and response-latency measures to supplement self-report measures. These measures are based on techniques commonly used in cognitive psychology. In priming studies, for instance, a prime could be the face of a White or Black person or a house. After seeing this prime, participants are asked to make a judgment about a word that follows (e.g., “is it a word?”; “Can this word ever describe the category of objects represented by the prime?”). The quicker people can make that decision, the more associated these categories and characteristics are assumed to be.

Predicting Behavior

These studies demonstrate that Whites, even those who appear non-prejudiced on self-report measures, have generally negative associations with Blacks. As Dovidio notes, the general dissociation between what Whites report their attitudes are on prejudice scales and their spontaneous responses using priming techniques is consistent with the aversive racism framework.

Which, then, is a person's true attitude? Rather than asking this question, Dovidio suggests that it may be more productive to ask, "Which aspect of a person's attitude predicts what type of interracial behavior?" Specifically, Dovidio and his colleagues have found that self-report measures of prejudice are better predictors of deliberative, overt forms of discrimination, such as recommending harsher sentences to Black defendants and evaluating Black interviewers less favorably than White interviewers. He remarks, "If a White person boldly indicates that he or she has negative attitudes toward Blacks on a prejudice scale, it is not surprising that they would be more likely to openly discriminate against a Black person." However, a response latency measure of unconscious racial bias is a better predictor of the spontaneous activation of negative racial stereotypes and of less controllable behaviors, such as nonverbal behavior.

In his address, Dovidio explained that the development of these new techniques for measuring automatic, often unconscious, racial attitudes can help us better understand barriers to interracial communication. Whites and Blacks may be attending to different aspects of their interactions. In one of Dovidio's recent studies, a Black and a White person first interacted and then completed questionnaires that asked how friendly they felt they behaved during the conversation and how friendly their partner acted. In general, how friendly Whites thought they were correlated with their self-report prejudice scores: Those who said they were less prejudiced said that they behaved in a more friendly manner with the Black partner in the subsequent interaction. Whites' perceptions were guided by their conscious attitudes, and at this level they seemed to be behaving consistently. In contrast, the perceptions of Black partners about the friendliness of these same White participants were more strongly associated with the Whites' response latency measure of bias. That is, in assessing how friendly the White person was, Blacks may have been considering not only the overt, consciously controlled behavior of the partner but also the non-conscious behaviors (such as eye contact, nonverbal expression of discomfort) that Whites were unable to monitor or control. Thus, Whites may intend to convey a positive and friendly attitude to their Black partner and believe that they have succeeded, while in the same interaction the Black partner may be attuned to the negative or mixed-message inadvertently sent by Whites, which produces a very different, potentially conflicting perspective that can contribute to racial tension and distrust.

Reducing Bad Habits

The fact that negative attitudes may exist and be expressed automatically does not mean that racial bias is inevitable or immutable. The work of Patricia Devine suggests that this form of prejudice is like a "bad habit." It is an over learned response that can be unlearned. As Devine proposes, an important first step is making people aware of discrepancies between their conscious ideals and automatic negative response. "By making these nonconscious negative responses conscious," Dovidio states, "we can take advantage of the genuinely good intentions of aversive racists to motivate them to gain the experiences they need to unlearn one set of responses and learn the new set that they desire." With the support of a grant from NIMH, Gaertner and Dovidio are investigating how these intergroup experiences can best be structured to produce generalizable and enduring reductions in bias. Dovidio concludes, "Understanding the nature of race relations needs to continue to involve systematic investigation of the perspective of Whites toward Blacks and other racial and ethnic groups, but it also requires a more complete understanding and appreciation of the perspective of these groups that historically have been victimized by prejudice and discrimination."