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The Complexity of Racial Prejudice: The Importance of a Broader Perspective*

La complejidad del prejuicio racial: La importancia de una perspectiva más amplia

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Our ability to relate stimuli and events in complex and arbitrarily applicable ways is considered a key feature of our language and cognition. However, although this ability, arbitrarily applicable relational responding (AARR), can be related to our increasingly developed technology and advancements in science, it can also allow the development of prejudiced behaviors (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2020).

Racially prejudiced behaviors can be seen as instances of AARRing that lead to the categorization of races¹ in frames such as opposition (e.g., Black as opposite to White) and hierarchy (e.g., White as better than people of color). When these behaviors happen, individuals can react in negative ways without having previous experience with a specific group or individual (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2020).

¹ The concept of race used here is the sociological one, given that, according to Biology, there is only one race, the human race.

Behavioral researchers have studied experimental prejudice models (Watt et al., 1991). More recently, an instrument was developed through the advance of Relational Frame Theory (Barnes-Holmes & Harte, 2022), to assess the strength of derived relational responding, which allows investigating a myriad of behaviors including social categorization that occurs rapidly and despite an individual's efforts to hide or respond differently.

The Implicit Relational Assessment Procedure (IRAP) is a procedure that displays pairs of stimuli to a participant whose task is to respond consistently and inconsistently (according to their reinforcement history) throughout block trials. The premise is that all things being equal, a participant would respond faster to relations that are consistent with his/her history as compared to inconsistent relations. The difference between the consistent and inconsistent blocks is called the IRAP effect (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2006).

Recently, Beck et al. (2022) used the IRAP to assess whether racial biases of White individuals would decrease after a perspective taking and a values clarification training. The idea was captivating because it relates to the difficulty of finding effective ways to alter the content of prejudices and because it resonates with RFT. As the authors stated, “modifying behavioral patterns that sustain racial bias may be more effective than changing the content of thoughts that are indicators of racial bias” (Beck et al., 2022, p. 7). We were pleased with this proposal primarily because of the potential of impacting this undesirable behavior and the possibilities it opens for intervention.

Beck et al. (2022) recruited 39 White U.S. citizens aged 18 to 54 years from different contexts (universities, colleges, schools). The data collection was conducted remotely via Zoom. Participants were divided into two groups. Both groups responded to stimuli measuring empathy, racism, perspective taking, and values. The only

difference was in the second perspective taking task, which instructed participants from the experimental group to imagine a day in a life of a Black individual. In contrast, the control group was not instructed on which perspective to do the exercise.

The explicit measures showed no significant difference, and one point that could receive more attention was the empathy levels. The authors stated that scores under 45 indicated below average empathy levels, and both groups (experimental and control) showed medium results between 35 and 37 on pre- and posttests. This point emphasizes the possibility that those participants could be less affected by procedures of perspective taking.

In addition, the IRAP used some parameters that are not common in the most recent IRAP studies, like longer response times for adult participants (i.e., median 3000 ms) and very few trials per block (only 12). Maybe this was related to the pandemic context, but it was not justified in the paper. Therefore, it would be expected few exciting results on the IRAP. Nevertheless, the data showed quite the opposite. There was an interesting difference among the groups where the experimental group showed faster response times in the pro-Black trials and the control group in the pro-White trials. The control group results on trial-type 1 (White-positive) were so robust that it suggests the occurrence of a Single Trial Type Dominance Effect (Finn et al., 2018). However, one unexpected result was the faster responses in the experimental group to anti-Black on trial-type 3, even though it was not as quick as trial-type 4 (pro-Black).

Given the challenges of an exploratory research, along with a remote data collection, the results were interesting and give room to other questions, such as do we need both strategies (values consistency and perspectivetaking task) to attain such a result? Could a different duration of the exercises, which took approximately 10-15 min each influence the results? Would participants with more empathy levels influence the

IRAP results? Would these results be maintained in the short/long term? These questions will remain unanswered until more investigation on this topic is carried out.

In any case, it was great to see an investigation of racial bias using the IRAP in an “intervention” format: we have, in the literature, some published studies that used the IRAP to investigate racial biases (Drake et al., 2010, 2015; Power et al., 2009; Power et al., 2017). Most of them aimed to assess racial biases and/or to compare the IRAP results with the so-called explicit measures of prejudice. Although those objectives are important, it is also relevant to design studies that aim at the reduction of those prejudices.

Furthermore, the authors were correct in looking at more than one independent variable for this investigation. When we assume verbally capable human interaction with the environment, as most recent updates on Relational Frame Theory enable us to understand (Barnes-Holmes & Harte, 2022), the functional analysis will necessarily be more expansive and more complex. For example, regarding racially prejudiced behavior like in this paper, it is clear today that we should focus not only on specific relational responses but also on challenging the relational repertoire from a broader perspective. An example of such a perspective was proposed initially by Levin et al. (2014), and it is strongly coherent with the proposal of this paper. Levin et al. (2014) work showed how much psychological flexibility or inflexibility relates to stigma, with a sample of 604 participants but using instruments with less precision than the IRAP (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2006). Then we hope that, following this first step taken by Beck and colleagues, other members of our research community may produce more data helping to diminish this undesired behavior that is racial prejudice. We believe that more research of the same nature as the one developed here will be essential to clarify possible interventions

of prejudice, considered here as complex derived relational responses that we experience in our daily interactions.

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Notes

*Critic review of the article: Beck, C., Garcia, Y., & Catagnus, R. (2022). Effects of Perspective Taking and Values Consistency in Reducing Implicit Racial Bias.

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