Social Structure, Narrative and Explanation

I. Introduction

Recent work on implicit bias seems to provide a key ingredient in the explanation of persistent inequality in societies where, although substantial progress has been achieved, there is still far to go. Even societies in which great effort has been put towards social justice remain unjust.

One might argue that righting the wrongs that have been entrenched for centuries cannot be achieved overnight. The arc of the moral universe is long, and justice may still be distant even if we are making progress. Even so, it is illuminating to see that injustice persists in the face of good intentions and increased legal protections. And it is important to determine why it persists.

This is where the study of implicit bias seems to offer insight: not all discrimination is *explicit*. Our cognitive systems are constructed in such a way that our conscious beliefs and intentions are just the tip of the iceberg. Our perception, thought, and action are also substantially influenced by cognitive structures that are not normally evident to us. Even those who are explicitly committed to equity and justice may, nevertheless, act in ways that are problematically discriminatory, for explicit deliberation enters the process for deciding how to act quite late, or only in special circumstances, if at all. Perhaps learning how to manage implicit biases more effectively will bend the arc so justice can be sooner achieved.

Although I am convinced that implicit bias plays a role in perpetuating injustice, I will argue that an adequate account of how implicit bias functions must situate it within a broader theory of social structures and structural injustice, and changing structures is often a precondition for changing patterns of thought and action and is certainly required for durable change.

II. Structural Injustice: Basics

One tradition in the theory of social justice argues that it is a mistake to focus on the actions and attitudes of individuals as the primary source of injustice, for racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are structural. Very roughly,

1. Racism, sexism, and the like, are to be analyzed, in the primary sense, in terms of unjust and interlocking social structures, not in terms of the actions and attitudes of individuals.

   a. Although individuals may have racist or sexist attitudes, these are neither necessary nor sufficient for race or sex oppression.

   b. The *normative core* of what's wrong with racism/sexism lies not in the "bad attitudes" of individuals but in the asymmetrical burdens and benefits and inegalitarian relationships that societies impose on such groups.

2. Correcting the wrongs of racism, sexism, and the like, is not best achieved by focusing on the "bad attitudes" of individuals.

   a. The structural injustices may persist even when attitudes change.

   b. People are resentful when they are blamed for problems much bigger than themselves. Resentful people are resistant to change.

Against this backdrop, it is unclear how to situate recent work on implicit bias. First, is implicit bias introduced into the debate as part of a normative analysis of the wrongs of racism/sexism, or simply as a factor in the causal explanation of persistent inequality? Second, if the best explanation of social stratification is structural, then implicit bias seems at best tangential to what's needed to achieve justice. Why the recent emphasis on implicit bias as a solution? My concern in this discussion will be on the explanatory rather than normative role of implicit bias.

Even if oppression is a structural phenomenon, recognition of implicit bias is a more significant advance than the argument just offered acknowledges.

   Re 1a and 2a: Although racism and sexism can occur without *explicit* racist and sexist attitudes, injustice will always involve problematic behavior on the part of individuals, and often this behavior is the result of *implicit* racist and sexist attitudes.

   Re 1b. Implicit bias may be part of the normative story, for insofar as we can change our implicit attitudes, we are plausibly responsible for them.

   Re 2b. Although the charge of *implicit* bias is personal, it avoids blaming individuals of bigotry. Moreover, it is collective: we *all* suffer from implicit bias, so no one is singled out as the evil perpetrator.

I think this first response is helpful, but doesn't go far enough.

III. Individualism, Psychologism, and Standard Stories

Charles Tilly has described a common form of narrative explanation that is ubiquitous in everyday life, and also in philosophy. A narrative explanation works by providing a "standard story":

   To construct a standard story, start with a limited number of interacting characters, individual or collective. Your characters may be persons, but they may also be organizations such as churches and states or even abstract categories such as social classes and regions. Treat your characters as independent, conscious and self-motivated. Make all their significant actions occur as consequences of their own deliberations or impulses.

Limit the time and space within which your characters interact. With the possible exception of externally generated accidents – you can call them "chance" or "acts of God" – make sure everything that happens results directly from your characters' actions. (Tilly 2002, 26)

Tilly goes on to summarize the key elements. Standard stories provide a

(1) limited number of interacting characters, (2) limited time and space, (3) independent, conscious, self-motivated actions, (4) with the exception of externally generated accidents, all actions resulting from previous actions by the characters.

Tilly argues, however, that

…whatever else we have learned about inequality, social scientists have made clear that a great deal of social inequality results from indirect, unintended, collective, and environmentally mediated effects that fit very badly into standard stories. (Tilly 2002, 28)

Standard Story of Social Stratification: Greg is an employer who is considering three candidates for a job: Kwame, Kathy, and Eric. Greg is (explicitly) sexist and racist and although Kwame and Kathy are better qualified than Eric, Greg hires Eric because he is a white male, rather than Kwame or Kathy. Repeat this scenario – including applications for educational opportunities, access to health and financial resources, etc. – and this provides an explanation of social inequality along lines of race/sex.

Nouveau Story of Social Stratification: The same as the Standard Story, except Greg is not explicitly racist, but only implicitly so. Greg's actions (and those of others like him) are neither consciously or intentionally discriminatory, nevertheless, repeated occurrences of implicit bias explain systematic inequality along the lines of race/sex.

Although Nouveau Stories do not rely simply on conscious intentional action, clearly they remain limited in their ability to accommodate the kinds of explanations that Tilly has in mind. But wait...what sort of explanations?

IV. Three (of many) Ways Structure and/or Culture Can Be Explanatory

a) Structural constraints/enablements (simple case)

Parental Leave: Larry and Lisa are employed at the same company in comparable positions and make the same salary. They have a child, Lulu. They desire to be equal co-parents of the child; however, Lisa is eligible for paid maternity leave and Larry is not eligible for any paid parental leave. They cannot afford to have Larry take unpaid leave. Lisa becomes the primary parent through her experience in the first three months and

when she returns to work chooses a more flexible schedule. Ten years later, Larry's salary is significantly higher than Lisa's which gives him more power at home and in the workplace. (See Cudd 2006; Okin 1989.)

A crucial factor in such a scenario is that Lisa and Larry's decision-making is relationally constrained. They are not in a position to make decisions that are independent of each other's and the context defines what options are available to each, i.e., their behavior is affected by their positions in a structure. Larry may gain the power he does without any bias, explicit or implicit, on the part of individuals he interacts with.

b) Social meaning

Dismissed from class: Rashaan and Jamal are public high school students in a history class together. The teacher, Ms. H., and about three quarters of the class are white. In a discussion of the assigned material, Rashaan repeatedly interrupts Ms. H. to disagree with her and talks over the other students when they try to answer her questions. Ms. H. asks Rashaan to stop interrupting and to wait his turn, but this just makes him more agitated. Eventually Ms. H asks him to leave and report to the Asst. Principal's office. Jamal and other non-white students in the class take Ms. H. to be calling out Rashaan because he is black, and stop trusting her. As a result, they do not engage the material and do poorly in the class.

For the purposes of the example, let us suppose that Ms. H. has a strict policy of dismissing students from class who disrupt the discussion and prevent others from sharing their views and that she applies the policy fairly to Rashaan. She is not acting towards Rashaan in a way that is biased. Nevertheless, her action has social meaning that she does not control. Such examples suggest that social meaning when occurring together with common psychological responses to frustration and disrespect, e.g., mistrust, ego depletion, effort pessimism, is a factor in explaining the academic achievement gap. (Haslanger, forthcoming)

In general, words and actions have meanings that go beyond the agent's intentions. (Burge (1979) on arthritis; Lessig (1995) on seatbelts.) Telling someone digging into a large serving of French fries that fries are unhealthy has a different (social) meaning depending on whom you are addressing. The same holds for sending a student to the Assistant Principal for acting up in class. But isn't social meaning a matter of biased attitudes?

Any society or social context has what I call here social meanings – the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context…(Lessig 1995, 951-2)

In spite of the possibility of change and contestation, the effects of social meaning are "in an important way, non-optional. They empower or constrain

individuals, whether or not the individual choses the power or constraints." (Lessig 1995, 955; see also 1000; Anderson 2010) Such social meanings are the threads in the fabric of culture. They matter. Beliefs about the meaning of one's behavior will have a significant effect on how one behaves. (Think of stereotype threat.) Individual bias on the part of others is not actually necessary for the bad effects. If social meanings are derogatory or stigmatizing, true beliefs about meaning will have systematic harmful effects.

c) Material conditions, resources

> *Bus schedule:* Jason has a job at a factory in the suburbs. His shift begins at 6am. He is poor and relies on the bus to get to work. He takes the first bus from his neighborhood in the morning and after a 45 minute commute arrives at his job on time. Due to cutbacks, however, the city has decided to reduce the bus service and there is no bus leaving the city in the morning that will get him to work on time. He asks for a shift change, but it is not eligible. He loses his job. [Variant: lack of bus at any time that will accommodate a wheelchair.]

Lack of access to things, wealth, technology, transportation, and other concrete social goods, is a huge factor in explaining social inequality. Jason's boss may be constrained by rules about shift changes; the city may be constrained by the tax base; Jason, and those in a similar position, is clearly constrained by the lack of resources.

The cases just sketched should be familiar, and are intended to be a reminder of some factors – other than individual discrimination or bias – that explain persistent inequality. The point is not that discrimination has never played a role at any point in the history of the policies, norms, meanings or distribution of resources. Rather, my (perhaps obvious) claim is that a narrative explanation of the sort modeled in the Standard Story or the Nouveau Story misses the important factors in the persistence of social inequality.

V. Relational/Cultural (material/symbolic) Loops
There is a tendency among those who endorse structuralist accounts of injustice to claim that social relations determine culture or ideology. Recall Marx:

> The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx 1859/1977)

If (explicit/implicit) bias is simply ideology that is internalized while occupying the social structures it supports, then individual attempts to correct for implicit bias is not only beside the point, but is futile, as long as the structures remain.

However, there is a broad consensus in recent sociology (and related fields) that social explanation requires attention to the interdependence of structure, culture, and agency (though there is controversy over how each is defined).[1]

> ...if inequality is 'structural', that is, linked to the distribution of goods and resources and embedded in everyday rules and interactions, but is also continually reactivated through agency, then neither 'structural' changes nor changes in 'consciousness' will on their own disrupt the mutually reinforcing facets of domination: We can neither 'think ourselves' out of oppression nor will freedom result automatically from a redistribution of goods and resources, although both are important contributors to freedom. (Einspahr 2010,17)

We are agents, both informed by culture and entrenched in social relations.

The pessimistic take on this is that the relational and cultural dimensions reinforce each other by forming feedback loops, e.g., stigmatizing meanings generate mistrust that alienate non-white teens from school; the lack of education and concern with professional success reinforces the stigmatizing meanings. The optimistic take is that the violent appropriation of the means of production may not be necessary in order to bring about social change (!), for resistant agency and countercultural movements make a difference. Drawing attention to and correcting implicit bias can be part of this effort.

VI. Individualism as Ideology
If attention to implicit bias is valuable, why then the long lecture full of doubts? And if individual agency can disrupt unjust structures, why the complaints about Standard Stories?

Some of you may have noticed that although in §III I raised doubts about the usefulness of stories, in §IV I relied heavily on stories about Larry and Lisa, Rashaan, Ms. H., and Jason to make my points. Doesn't this show that narrative *is* valuable in explaining persistent inequality?

Note that Tilly is not claiming that narrative, in general, is at odds with explaining inequality. It is the focus on *Standard stories*. The first problem with Standard Stories is their individualism. (And, I would add, their *psychologism*.) The second problem is that we, as theorists, lose track of the

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[1] Arguably, this is *the* theoretical issue occupying social theory for the past three decades (Ortner 1984, Sewell 1992, Hays 1994, White 2008, Levi 2009).

fact that stories are produced in and through social processes. Stories are one way we create and reproduce social meanings.

> Stories emerge from active social interchange, modify as a result of social interchange, but in their turn constrain social interchange as well. They embody ideas concerning what forms of action and interaction are possible, feasible, desirable, and efficacious, hence at least by implication what forms of action and interaction would be impossible, impracticable, undesirable, or ineffectual. Even if the individuals involved harbor other ideas, the embedding of stories in social networks seriously constrains interactions, hence collective actions, of which people in those networks are capable. (9)

Standard stories may be irresistible for humans. They may also be valuable because they focus on the autonomy of persons and enable us to locate and judge moral responsibility: "[People] ordinarily carry on their moral reasoning in standard story mode; they judge actual or possible actions by their conscious motives and their immediately foreseeable effects." (36) But, as Tilly suggested before, Standard Stories "provide an execrable guide to social explanation." (35)

And I would add, Standard Stories are an execrable guide to what is morally relevant. The focus on individuals (and their attitudes) occludes the structural and cultural context that both constrains and enables our action, and the injustice that we mindlessly enact. They reinforce fictional conceptions of autonomy and self-determination that prevent us from taking responsibility for our social milieu (social meanings, social relations social structures).

VII. Conclusion
Thus far I've suggested that although there is space for attention to implicit bias in social critique, it is only a small space, and implicit bias should not simply be invoked in a Standard Story mode of explanation. I've also suggested that we should be cautious, more generally, in relying on Standard Stories and that they warrant a place as proper object of theorizing. I will add two broader thoughts: one (a) methodological, the other (b) ontological.

a) A longstanding issue in social science is (roughly) the relationship between first-person understandings of action and social processes, and third person explanations of them. Often these perspectives are taken to be at odds, and theorists ally themselves with one side as opposed to the other. Attention to the relational/cultural (or material/symbolic) feedback loops, however, suggests that there is a dynamic relationship between explanation and edification or, we might contentiously say, emancipation. Our first person understandings of action and social processes, e.g., in Standard Stories, are culturally formed, and critical distance is necessary in order to gain both descriptive and normative

purchase on them. In effect, social phenomenology cannot trump explanation. Social explanation, in turn, offers resources to change our understandings of action and social processes, but explanation itself is a tool, and importantly, a tool for social self-understanding. So social explanation should engage not only our scientific, but also our interpretive and normative projects. Or at least, this interdependence between emancipatory agency and explanation is at the heart of Critical Social Theory.

(b) Critique of explanatory individualism often leads theorists to deny ontological individualism. For example, Tilly's approach to social theory displaces the individual from the center of analysis and instead focuses on relations: "transaction, interaction, information flow, exchange, mutual influence, or social tie [is the] elementary unit." (34) I am sympathetic with this approach (though tend to focus on social practices and a broader range of social relations). Tilly goes so far as to claim that, "For relational realists, individuals, groups, and social systems are contingent, changing social products of interaction." (34) However, we need to go that far, i.e., to reject a basic ontological commitment to individuals or persons due to the failures of explanatory individualism. (Epstein 2009)

But a different reading of Tilly's claim is more plausible. He says:

> Standard stories locate identities within individual bodies as some combination of attribute, experience, and consciousness, then derive collective identities from the attributes, experiences, and consciousness shared by many individuals. In political life, however, collective identities always form as combinations of relations with others, representations of those relations, and shared understandings of those relations. (10)

We should distinguish individuals, understood as persons, and individuals, understood as "identities." I am not my "identity," (in the relevant sense) for I may survive a change in my identity. However, as Tilly suggests, "identities" are relational, and are not constituted by my attitudes and consciousness. (See also Alcoff 2005, Witt 2011)

Tilly has a point, however, that is highly apt for certain philosophical approaches to social life. Persons are not simply sites of intentionality, and the social world does not just consist of combined or collective sites of intentionality. (Epstein forthcoming) Factories, transportation systems, childcare centers, unemployment, and poverty are also social phenomena, and I am causally implicated in their existence and omission in my milieu, whether I am aware of it or not. Our failure to recognize this may be what recent emphasis on implicit bias is really about.

Handout with references at: http://sallyhaslanger.weebly.com/research.html

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