

The Implicit Association Test (IAT).

(Edited passages from *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell.)

It is based on a seemingly obvious-but nonetheless quite profound-observation. We make connections much more quickly between pairs of ideas that are already related in our minds than we do between pairs of ideas that are unfamiliar to us.

One of the reasons that the IAT has become so popular in recent years as a research tool is that the effects it is measuring are not subtle; as those of you who felt yourself slowing down on the second half of the Work/Family IAT above can attest, the IAT is the kind of tool that hits you over the head with its conclusions. “When there’s a strong prior association, people answer in between four hundred and six hundred milliseconds,” says Greenwald. “When there isn’t, they might take two hundred to three hundred milliseconds longer than that-which in the realm of these kinds of effects is huge. One of my cognitive psychologist colleagues described this as an effect you can measure with a sundial.”

[The author took the test and it said he had a moderate automatic preference for whites]

So what does this mean? Does this mean I’m a racist, a self-hating black person? Not exactly. What it means is that our attitudes toward things like race or gender operate on two levels. First of all, we have our conscious attitudes. This is what we choose to believe. These are our stated values, which we use to direct our behavior deliberately. The apartheid policies of South Africa or the laws in the American South that made it difficult for African Americans to vote are manifestations of conscious discrimination, and when we talk about racism or the fight for civil rights, this is the kind of discrimination that we usually refer to. But the IAT measures something else. It measures our second level of attitude, our racial attitude on an unconscious level- the immediate, automatic associations that tumble out before we’ve even had time to think. We don’t deliberately choose our unconscious attitudes. And as I wrote about in the first chapter, we may not even be aware of them. The giant computer that is our unconscious silently crunches all the data it can from the experiences we’ve had, the people we’ve met, the lessons we’ve learned, the books we’ve read, the movies we’ve seen, and so on, and it forms an opinion. That’s what is coming out in the IAT.

The disturbing thing about the test is that it shows that our unconscious attitudes may be utterly incompatible with our stated conscious values. As it turns out, for example, of the fifty thousand African Americans who have taken the Race IAT so far,

about half of them, like me, have stronger associations with whites than with blacks. How could we not? We live in North America, where we are surrounded every day by cultural messages linking white with good. “You don’t choose to make positive associations with the dominant group,” says Mahzarin Banaji, who teaches psychology at Harvard University and is one of the leaders in IAT research. “But you are required to. All around you, that group is being paired with good things. You open the newspaper and you turn on the television, and you can’t escape it.”

The IAT is more than just an abstract measure of attitudes. It’s also a powerful predictor of how we act in certain kinds of spontaneous situations. If you have a strongly pro-white pattern of associations, for example, there is evidence that that will affect the way you behave in the presence of a black person. It’s not going to affect what you’ll choose to say or feel or do. In all likelihood, you won’t be aware that you’re behaving any differently than you would around a white person. What this unconscious first impression will do, in other words, is throw the interview hopelessly off course.

Our first impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions—we can alter the way we thin-slice [make intuitive judgments] by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions. If you are a white person who would like to treat black people as equals in every way—who would like to have a set of associations with blacks that are as positive as those that you have with whites—it requires more than a simple commitment to equality. It requires that you change your life so that you are exposed to minorities on a regular basis and become comfortable with them and familiar with the best of their culture, so that when you want to meet, hire, date, or talk with a member of a minority, you aren’t betrayed by your hesitation and discomfort. Taking rapid cognition seriously—acknowledging the incredible power, for good and ill, that first impressions play in our lives—requires that we take active steps to manage and control those impressions. In the next section of this book, I’m going to tell three stories about people who confronted the consequences of first impressions and snap judgments. Some were successful. Some were not. But all, I think, provide us with critical lessons of how we can better understand and come to terms with the extraordinary power of thin-slicing.

Stop here. If you find this topic interesting you can read the rest at a later time but we won’t discuss this as a class

Seven Seconds in the Bronx: The Delicate Art of Mind Reading

Diallo was from Guinea. In 1999, he was twenty-two and working as a peddler in lower Manhattan, selling videotapes and socks and gloves from the sidewalk along Fourteenth Street. He was short and unassuming, about five foot six and 150 pounds, and he lived at 1157 Wheeler, on the second floor of one of the street's narrow apartment houses. On the night of February 3, 1999, Diallo returned home to his apartment just before midnight, talked to his roommates, and then went downstairs and stood at the top of the steps to his building, taking in the night. A few minutes later, a group of plainclothes police officers turned slowly onto Wheeler Avenue in an unmarked Ford Taurus. There were four of them—all white, all wearing jeans and sweatshirts and baseball caps and bulletproof vests, and all carrying police-issue 9-millimeter semiautomatic handguns. They were part of what is called the Street Crime Unit, a special division of the New York Police Department, dedicated to patrolling crime “hot spots” in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Driving the Taurus was Ken Boss. He was twenty-seven. Next to him was Sean Carroll, thirty-five, and in the backseat were Edward McMellon, twenty-six, and Richard Murphy, twenty-six.

[I removed here the moment by moment retelling of the events]

“Yeah, I thought I saw a gun in his hand. . . . What I seen was an entire weapon. A square weapon in his hand. It looked to me at that split second, after all the gunshots around me and the gun smoke and Ed McMellon down, that he was holding a gun and that he had just shot Ed and that I was next.”

Carroll and McMellon fired sixteen shots each: an entire clip. Boss fired five shots. Murphy fired four shots. There was silence. Guns drawn, they climbed the stairs and approached Diallo. “I seen his right hand,” Boss said later. “It was out from his body. His palm was open. And where there should have been a gun, there was a wallet. . . . I said, ‘Where’s the f*cking gun?’”

Boss ran up the street toward Westchester Avenue because he had lost track in the shouting and the shooting of where they were. Later, when the ambulances arrived, he was so distraught, he could not speak.

Carroll sat down on the steps, next to Diallo's bullet-ridden body, and started to cry.

There were those who said that it was just a horrible accident, an inevitable by-product of the fact that police officers sometimes have to make life-or-death decisions in conditions of uncertainty. That's what the jury in the Diallo trial concluded, and Boss, Carroll, McMellon, and Murphy were all acquitted of murder charges. On the other side were those who saw what happened as an open-and-shut case of racism. There were protests and demonstrations throughout the city. Diallo was held up as a martyr.

Neither of these explanations, however, is particularly satisfying. There was no evidence that the four officers in the Diallo case were bad people, or racists, or out to get Diallo. On the other hand, it seems wrong to call the shooting a simple accident, since this wasn't exactly exemplary police work. The officers made a series of critical misjudgments, beginning with the assumption that a man getting a breath of fresh air outside his own home was a potential criminal.

What happened on Wheeler Avenue is a powerful example of how mind reading works-and how it sometimes goes terribly awry. Accidental, mind-reading failures are sometimes like that. They aren't always as obvious and spectacular as other breakdowns in rapid cognition. They are subtle and complex and surprisingly common, and what happened on Wheeler Avenue is a powerful example of how mind reading works-and how it sometimes goes terribly awry.