Racial Bias and the Validity of the Implicit Association Test

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Extended Abstract

For decades, social scientists have been concerned with issues of racial bias in decision making. Though the causes and effects of bias has proven themselves difficult to identify, there is one method that has recently caught fire—the Implicit Association Test (IAT henceforth). Several studies have indicated the IAT is a good predictor of behavior. The problem is these studies have not implemented costly decision making.

Despite this glaring shortcoming, there is some empirical evidence that the IAT has a persistent impact on both hot and cold phase decisions, suggesting the need for a laboratory experiment. In this paper, I develop a model to study giving behaviors under conditions of implicit bias. I then test this model by implementing a novel laboratory experiment. I focus on giving behaviors because they are both non-strategic and non-spontaneous. Therefore the subject can easily control these behaviors. Additionally, I allow subjects to sort in and out of giving environments in order to better identify the biases of different sharers.

Specifically, my experiment uses a Dictator Game with an exit option to study both these giving behaviors, as well as a subject’s willingness to be exposed to a giving environments. In doing so, I adapt the IAT for use in economics experiments in order to test its validity in identifying bias. Thus, I take a necessary first step by introducing this line of research to the economics laboratory. Finally, I compare IAT score to dictator giving and sorting as a test of its validity. Consistent with previous work, I find that the presence of a sorting option negatively influences giving, suggesting a reluctance to give. However, despite the IAT’s popularity, it fails to predict even simple economic behaviors like dictator giving.

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