

Barbara Kay: Actually, it turns out that you may be less racist than you've been led to believe

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Dean Bicknell/ Postmedia News

U of T Professor Jordan Peterson debates Bill C-16 on Nov. 19, 2016.

I had the pleasure, a few weeks ago, of attending a seminar at Ryerson University as a specially invited guest to hear University of Toronto psychology professor Jordan Peterson address a colleague's students on freedom of speech and gender issues that have made him a household name in Canada.

I was of course already familiar with much of Peterson's material from his videos, which didn't diminish by an iota my sense of privilege in experiencing the force of live presentation. But my ears perked up at something new in his remarks: an allusion to the "Implicit Association Test" (IAT). According to Peterson, the IAT, a pseudo-scientific diagnostic test to measure an individual's personal biases, has been introduced into the CBC as a tool for identifying and measuring unconscious biases among its senior executives, in all likelihood with the objective of weeding them out through training.

By coincidence, I had just read a lengthy, detailed and quite damning indictment of the IAT by scrupulously thorough investigative reporter Jesse Singal of New York Magazine's Science of Us. I hope the honchos at the CBC will read it as well.

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The IAT is a word association game that reveals an individual's bias and can supposedly predict racist action. Researchers Mahzarin Banaji, currently chair of Harvard University's psychology department, and Anthony Greenwald, a social psychology academic at the University of Washington, introduced the test at a 1998 Seattle press conference, claiming their data suggested 90-95 per cent of Americans harboured the "roots of unconscious prejudice."

Anyone can take the test on the Project Implicit Website, hosted by Harvard U. By October 2015, more than 17 million individuals had completed it (with presumably 90-95 per cent of them then self-identifying as racist). Liberal observers love the IAT. New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote in 2015, "It's sobering to discover that whatever you believe intellectually, you're biased about race, gender, age or disability." Kristof's tone is more complacent than sober, though. For progressives, the more widespread bias can be demonstrated to be, the more justifiable institutional and state intrusions into people's minds become.

Banaji and Greenwald have themselves made far-reaching claims for the test: the "automatic White preference expressed on the Race IAT is now established as signaling discriminatory behavior. It predicts discriminatory behavior even among research participants who earnestly (and, we believe, honestly) espouse egalitarian beliefs. Among research participants who describe themselves as racially egalitarian, the Race IAT has been shown, reliably and repeatedly, to predict discriminatory behavior that was observed in the research."

Problem is, none of this can be authenticated. According to Singal, a great deal of scholarly work that takes the shine off the researchers' claims has been ignored by the media. The IAT is not verifiable and correlates weakly with actual lived outcomes. Meta-analyses cannot examine whether IAT scores predict discriminatory behaviour accurately enough for real-world application. An individual can score high for bias on the IAT and never act in a biased manner. He can take the test twice and get two wildly different scores. After almost two decades, the researchers have never posted test-retest reliability of commonly used IATs in publication.

It's a wonder the IAT has a shred of credibility left. In 2015 Greenwald and Banaji responded to a critic that the psychometric issues with race and ethnicity IATs "render them problematic to use to classify persons as likely to engage in discrimination," and that "attempts to diagnostically use such measures for individuals risk undesirably high rates of erroneous classifications." Greenwald acknowledged to Singal that "no one has yet undertaken a study of the race IAT's test-related reliability." In other words, the IAT is a useless tool for measuring implicit bias.

In an interesting aside, Singal points to a 2012 study published in Psychological Science by psychologist Jacquie Vorauer. As her experiment, Vorauer set white Canadians to work with aboriginal partners. Before doing so, some of the participants took an IAT that pertained to aboriginals, some took a non-race IAT and others were asked for their explicit feelings about the group. Aboriginals in the race-IAT group subsequently reported feeling less valued by their white partners as compared to aboriginals in all of the other groups. Vorauer writes, "If completing the IAT enhances caution and inhibition, reduces self-efficacy, or primes categorical thinking, the test may instead have negative effects." As Singal notes, this "suggests some troubling possibilities."

The IAT has potentially misinformed millions of test-takers, who believe that they are likely to act, or are routinely acting, with bias against their fellow citizens. Harboring biases is part of the human condition, and it is our right to hold them, especially those warranted by epidemiology and reason. Our actions are all that should concern our employers or the state's legal apparatus. Any directive to submit to the IAT by the state or a state-sponsored entity like the CBC constitutes an undemocratic intrusion into the individual's privacy.

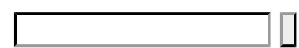
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In addition to Marc Bell's business pursuits, he's also produced plays, musicals and films. This is a man with a range of interests and his home reflects them

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