Sample paper #3

Short Paper 3: Implicit Biases and Social Cognition

In The Anatomy of Racial Inequality, Glenn Loury introduces the compelling notion of racial *stigma* as "biased social cognition." Such subtle but pervasive biases, he argues, are a major factor in the nagging persistence (and, in some cases, aggravation) of historical disparities across racial lines. Loury's idea is supported strongly by data from the Implicit Association Test, detailed by Jerry Kang in his essay "Trojan Horses of Race." Kang offers up the Harvard University-developed test as a scientific example of biased cognition in action and effectively answers questions about applicability. Loury and Kang's assertions show that minorities in America continue to face disadvantages that whites do not, making a strong case for affirmative governmental action to mitigate the effects of racial stigma; however, they also suggest that government policy alone will never be enough to solve the ubiquitous "race question."

Loury dives into a detailed analysis of biased social cognition in Chapter 3 of his book, "Racial Stigma." He notes that "eliminating discrimination in markets" – what he calls "discrimination in contract" – "cannot be expected to lead, even in the long term, to a solution for the problem of racial economic inequality" (Loury 101). Instead, he blames methods of social exclusion – "discrimination in contact" – that are a result of "developmental processes… conditioned by race" (Loury 100). These biases in cognition prevent underachieving minorities on the bottom rung of society from reaching their full potential, both because of their own perceptions of inferiority and those of others. Loury thus makes a crucial distinction between conscious discrimination that can be protected by law and subconscious stigmatization that operates

invisibly, pinpointing the current state of the American race problem. Notably, he does not blame flaws in individual morality, arguing that historical conditioning has imprinted implicit biases and stigmas onto almost all members of society.

Though Loury's argument is reasoned, it would fall apart at the seams without any solid evidence of the pervasive stigma he describes. Though he provides many such examples, the testament that I found most compelling was the Implicit Association Test (IAT), compiled by Drs. Brian Nozak, Mahzarin Banaji, and Tony Greenwald at Harvard University. When I first took the test in high school, I came out with a slight positive preference for darker-skinned subjects; when I took it again last week, I tested a slight positive preference to lighter-skinned peoples; and when I took it twice yesterday, my preferences had shifted back. Needless to say, I was instantly skeptical of the methodology behind the IAT. Was I really supposed to believe that my stigma had flip-flopped so quickly? Did the fact that I had played the "white-good/black-bad" game first skew my results? What's more, even *if* the aggregated results showed significant trends, what applications did they have for actual behavior? Did the fact that most people were slightly faster at the "white-good/black-bad" game translate into tangible differences in action?

A quick search on the website put many of my misgivings to rest. The findings themselves are clearly significant – on the IAT website, it shows that 27% of over 100,000 respondents from 2000-2006 showed a strong automatic preference for light skin, 27% moderate, and 16% slight – a sharp increase from the 2% who showed a strong automatic preference for dark skin, 4% moderate, and 6% slight. (17% showed little to no preference.) What's more, the site openly acknowledged the possibility of the ordering effect and made sure that exactly half of all data

samples began “white-good/black-bad” with the other half “black-good/white-bad.”

Kang’s article takes the analysis to the next step. He points out real-world stigma through the well-known “résumé study” in which equally qualified résumés with traditionally “white” and “black” names were submitted to employers; despite being no more qualified, the white résumés received 50% more calls than black ones. To demonstrate a more explicit connection between IATs and real-world stigma, Kang cites another study of employers that found a statistically significant link between gender IAT scores and evaluations of female applicants’ “social skills.” Like Loury, he avoids a moral explanation by noting the “discrepancy between our explicit and implicit meanings” – that is, between what we consciously think and unconsciously assume (Kang 1513). Surprisingly, even for those who are aware of their stigma, “simply ‘willing’ a more correct or unbiased result may produce little benefit” (Kang 1529).

The import of this statement must not be glossed over: it means that *the elimination of one’s own racial stigma may lie beyond the scope of individual agency,* even for the “racially enlightened” who acknowledge the error of their ways. The consequences are far-reaching. Once we admit the presence of implicit biases that have infected our patterns of cognition and result in subtle but substantive discrimination in contact, a clear justification for affirmative action arises. After all, who else but the federal government could have the power to correct for such ubiquitous biases? If employers consistently hire whites over equally qualified blacks and schools do the same with admissions, the government (as the arbiter of the societal distribution of resources) arguably has an obligation to correct such injustices.

Yet government alone cannot be the answer: though it may correct for the symptoms of stigma, it

is powerless to cure the illness itself. Ameliorative policies themselves could be seen to perpetuate stigmas: they may provide for a significant increase in positive minority archetypes and thus help weaken biased social cognition, but as Justice Clarence Thomas and others have argued, they also enable it by allowing some to suggest that high-achieving members of oppressed groups needed an "unfair" boost to accomplish what they did. As an example, though black/Latino Ivy League students may serve as role models, many have also been subject to the negative perception of "only getting in because of affirmative action." In the realm of social cognition, then, government policies to alleviate inequality are at best a wash, serving as more of a short-term band-aid than a long-term catalyst for progress. The change must come from society itself, necessitating a redefinition of the very discourse surrounding race and inequality.

As Loury points out, the first issue to be addressed is liberal individualism, which "fails to comprehend how stigma-influenced dynamics… can induce objective racial inequality" (Loury 121). A new national dialogue must therefore deconstruct the myth of equal opportunity and acknowledge that disparities across ethnic groups are not due to essential gaps in ability but inequalities of opportunity that persist *despite* ostensible legal equality. But more importantly, racial stigma must be universally acknowledged as a legitimate factor that influences every aspect of our societal relations. It can no longer be enough to note that blacks are poorer than whites and argue about whether this is worth resolving; we must push ourselves as a nation to ask *why* these inequalities persist, for the facts simply speak for themselves.

Once we acknowledge that pervasive racial stigma is at fault, we can expose its naked social construction and begin the long and difficult process of cleansing biases from our collective

cognition. It is important to note that this change cannot be limited to the scholarly realm alone. What teams of elite researchers publish in academic journals often has little to no bearing on the sentiments of the greater American public; accordingly, this is a conversation to be initiated by our political and cultural leaders. We can look to government for some of the answers, but only by scientifically debunking notions of essentialism and cultural inferiority before the masses can we hope to achieve lasting and substantive racial progress.

Works Cited

Kang, Jerry. "Trojan Horses of Race." *Harvard Law Review* 118.5 (2005): 1489-1593.

Loury, Glenn. The Anatomy of Racial Inequality. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Sample paper #4

Race-Sighted Anonymity Axiom

In chapter four of his book "The Anatomy of Racial Inequality" Glenn Loury condemns certain features of liberal political theory because of their promotion of a race-blind view. Because racism has had deep historical effects on our society we would wrongly tie our hands by ignoring race in policymaking. Rather, we should recognize and account for the very tangible racial circumstances we live in, says Loury. In the course of his arguments Loury discusses one of the rules in social choice theory, generally approved of by liberals, called the Anonymity Axiom. The axiom is defined as "a postulate that declares it illegitimate for the social ranking to favor one state of affairs over another—A over B, say—if the only distinction between the two situations is that the identities of the persons located in various positions of the social order have been changed".[1] Thus we should not be concerned with *who* receives the various advantages and disadvantages that are doled out to members of society, but only the content of the benefits and harms. Because the Anonymity Axiom demands that we ignore the specific arrangement of welfare Loury considers it to imply that *racial* inequality, which is sensitive to the identity of individuals, should not enter in to our judgments about socio-economic endowments. Because of this race-blind component Loury rejects the Anonymity Axiom. However, I think a close look at the axiom in the context of race might lead us to a different interpretation. The Anonymity Axiom, properly understood, engages with the present-day consequences of past discrimination in exactly the way Loury believes policy should generally, and thus can be productively included in the rest of his argument.

[1] Glenn Loury, *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* p.115

The Anonymity Axiom is meant to ensure objectivity. There is a strong intuition that a social choice procedure that treats certain individuals specially (e.g. prioritizes their well-being), merely because of their identity, must be an unjust one. This presents a compelling motivation for holding on to the Anonymity Axiom if possible. Without it we would have to accommodate this intuition in some other, possibly very complex, way, or allow that this sort of partiality is not of major concern. A most obvious sort of violation of the Anonymity Axiom would be a social choice rule which preferred social outcomes in which I or my friends are well-off. This paradigm case of subjectivity in a decision procedure is clearly prohibited, and is relatively uninteresting. However, the analysis is less straightforward in the case of distributions that are patterned according to features of persons that are discernable from an *objective* point of view. Race, though it does not indicate anything meaningful about an individual's worth or potential according to Loury's assumptions and my own, is such a feature. The identification of individuals across lines of race is not arbitrary. It is therefore not obvious that situations in which people either are, or are not grouped according to race are equal according to the Anonymity Axiom.

Lets consider two extreme distributions, call then A and B, in order to test our understanding of the Anonymity Axiom. For simplification let us suppose that society is made up of only white and black people, with whites coming in at 85% of the population. In A a randomly distributed 15% of the population is in poverty (so 12.75% of the population is poor and white and 2.25% is poor and black). In B again 15% of the population is in poverty, but this time it is exactly the 15% of the population that is black, and there are no poor whites. The Anonymity Axiom says we ought to rank these

scenarios equally "*if the only distinction between the two situations is that the identities of the persons located in various positions of the social order have been changed*".[2] Is that an accurate characterization of the comparison between A and B? I think it clearly is not. The fact that being black directly corresponds to being in the lower of the two social positions in B, and vice versa, generates a real condition of segregation that is not present in A. This condition is not merely descriptive of the distribution, but an added factor. The traits attached to being poor or not in B are not subjective ones, and have a tangible effect on people's relationships and behavior, and a downstream effect on their holdings, that would be absent in A. Any standard applied to social order must be sensitive to these relationships, behavior, and long term consequences, and not just take a snapshot of people's resources. Therefore a meaningful Anonymity Axiom is able to discriminate between A and B here, showing that it is not completely race-blind.

Giving the axiom racial-sight in this way affords it greater authority to enforce impartiality. Someone who wanted to rely on the axiom to preclude the favoring of a procedure that favored one race need not worry. Instead of merely saying we cannot favor the distribution in which race X is especially advantaged, the Anonymity Axiom, working with other rules in our theory (e.g. Loury's anti-essentialism axiom), now allows us to *dis*favor that distribution. Put more simply, the goal of prohibiting racism is not at all impeded by this interpretation of the Anonymity Axiom.

It is worth note that A and B, as I constructed them, are at opposite ends of a spectrum, and neither applies to the situation of the real world. However, the above reasoning would clearly still be valid if B had instead been that 95% of the poor were black, or if A had involved 12.8% poor whites . Perhaps we cannot extend this to say

[2] Ibid

that the Anonymity Axiom would distinguish between *any* racial difference in the societal distribution, but wherever the distribution (relative to another distribution) is “raced” enough to produce changes in the way humans will associate with each other, the axiom need not rank the two equally. Different people will have different ideas about where this line is, but if we agree with the other arguments in Loury’s book we should believe we are on the “too raced” side of the line. Thus Loury is free to accept the Anonymity Axiom and nonetheless (or maybe somethemore) argue that the reduction of racial inequality is a legitimate and pressing social goal.