

## 12 Cognitive Dissonance and the Logic of Racism

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### Introduction

On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice, a 12-year old black boy, was playing with a replica toy airsoft gun in a city park in Cleveland, Ohio, when someone called 911 and reported that a male was pointing a pistol at random people. During the call, the caller mentioned twice that the pistol probably was fake. When police officer Timothy Loehmann and his partner arrived at the scene and spotted Rice, Loehmann immediately shot and killed Rice without first attempting to assess the situation. Cases like this, in which black people are murdered because they are black, have become all too common in the United States, as the civil unrest surrounding the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor illustrate. The question is what leads people, including those who have had training in law enforcement, to commit such heinous acts of violence?

Implicit, or unconscious, biases have often been evoked to explain the heightened police brutality against blacks and other marginalized groups in the United States. As Shirley Anne Tate and Damien Page shrewdly observe, “unconscious bias is the acceptable face of racism, the phrase that a majority white sector feels comfortable with using and discussing to describe itself” (2018, 141–142). But while implicit biases no doubt are a contributing factor to police brutality in the United States today, we should be careful not to blame modern-day lynchings of black people and other forms of blatant mistreatment of African Americans on implicit racial biases that allegedly can’t be helped. Doing so makes it too easy for perpetrators of racial violence to deny that they have done anything wrong, which is hardly ever the case.

Here we will argue that cognitive dissonance can help explain the logic of two forms of racism, which we will call “habitual racism” and “explicit racism.” Cognitive dissonance, a term originally coined by Leo Festinger (1957), is a distressing discrepancy between our apprehension of the fact that we have performed or want to perform an action and the fact that we disapprove of it. The discomfort associated with the state of dissonance ordinarily causes us to unconsciously deploy dissonance-reducing

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strategies aimed at lessening it. These strategies, if successful, can, for example, result in a reversal of the attitude of disapproval, a weakening of the desire to perform the action, or a change in how the action is classified or conceptualized (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones 2007; McGrath 2017; Vaidis and Bran 2019).

Here we distinguish among three types of racist actions: inadvertent bigotry, habitual racism, and explicit racism. "Racist action" should here be understood as referring to both racial violence and subtle racist acts, or what is also known as "racial microaggressions." Inadvertent bigotry can be traced solely to implicit racial biases. Since inadvertent bigots are neither implicitly nor explicitly racially motivated, they are not accountable for their racist act. Habitual racists are implicitly but not explicitly racially motivated. Although the racial motive is implicit, or unconscious, we argue that this type of racist action is fully agential, as the racial motive is grounded in habit or routine. Finally, explicit racists are explicitly racially motivated, and their actions are thus grounded in explicit racist attitudes. We should emphasize from the outset that we think there is a very fine line between these three different types of racist actions.

We argue that while inadvertent bigots and habitual racists are inclined to (sincerely) deny that they committed a racially motivated action, they have different reasons for their denial. Inadvertent bigots are denying it because, however deeply they search, they are not going to find any such motive. Habitual racists, by contrast, may hold explicit egalitarian attitudes but they are nonetheless implicitly racially motivated.<sup>1</sup> There is thus an implicit stressful conflict between their covert racist intentions and their overt egalitarian attitudes. While they aren't aware of the source of this distress, cognitive dissonance theory predicts that they nevertheless will engage in dissonance-reducing strategies. Specifically, we argue that they will be inclined to confabulate a description of the action in non-racial terms.

In contrast to the covert racial intentions of habitual racists, the overt racial intentions of explicit racists are, by definition, easily retrievable to them, so there is no discrepancy between their racist attitudes and their racist practices. There is, however, a discrepancy between their racist practices and the socially acceptable egalitarian attitudes. We argue that although it's easy for explicit racists to keep their overt racist attitudes to themselves, the discrepancy between their racial practices and society's egalitarian attitudes is a source of stress, which they are able to reduce only by attributing a "logical" motive to themselves. For example, they may tell themselves that they are performing honorable actions by punishing "dangerous black criminals." We further argue that a deviant psychology is a common characteristic of explicit racists, and it is this deviance that underpins some of the most egregious instances of police violence, most recently the brutal killing of George Floyd. We conclude by considering how cognitive dissonance may be used as a strategy for reducing racial discrimination and racial violence.

## Ambivalence versus Cognitive Dissonance

Suppose you are having dinner at your favorite restaurant and the waiter brings the dessert menu. You notice the mouth-watering crème brûlée and have a strong urge to order it because you just love the way it tastes, but you have an equally strong urge not to order the crème brûlée because you are trying to limit your sugar intake. This is a paradigm example of ambivalence. When you are ambivalent, you have a pair of beliefs, desires, intentions, emotions, or other attitudes whose contents are jointly inconsistent.

In the envisaged case, you are fully aware of both wanting the crème brûlée because of how good it tastes and not wanting the crème brûlée because of your commitment to limiting your sugar intake. Such cases result in indecisiveness, however brief. This indecisiveness can be resolved in one of two ways. You can let someone or something else make the decision for you (e.g., ask your friend to decide for you or flip a coin). Or you can wait and hope that one desire becomes stronger than the other. This may happen after carefully weighing your options or after circumstances change. For example, if the waiter is bringing out the crème brûlée for your friend, the sight of it might make your desire to order it override your desire not to. If, on the other hand, your friend reminds you that you are prediabetic, your desire not to order it might win out. Of course, an equally likely result is that your ambivalence doesn't resolve. This scenario would result in a failure to make a decision, which would lead to you not ordering the crème brûlée.

In such mundane cases, you may not experience any psychological distress from your ambivalence. But ambivalence can be associated with great discomfort, which is the hallmark of cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) originally employed the term "dissonance" to refer both to cases in which there is a cognitive discrepancy between "an attitude and a behavior," as he put it, and to psychological discomfort (e.g., frustration, guilt, shame, or self-hatred) that may elicit dissonance-reducing strategies.

Festinger's choice of term bore on its polysemy, simultaneously denoting a clash between a behavior and an attitude as well as being a play on the word's meaning in its musical context, where it denotes a musical quality commonly described as "grating," "jarring," "sharp," or "unnerving" (Vaidis and Bran 2019). To avoid equivocation and improve clarity, it has been suggested that we reserve the term "cognitive dissonance" for the evoked discomfort, and "cognitive inconsistency" or "cognitive discrepancy" to refer to the *incoherence* that triggered the psychological discomfort (Harmon-Jones 2002; Gawronski and Strack 2012; Vaidis and Bran 2018, 2019). We agree that the term "cognitive inconsistency" and its cognates is a fitting term for conflicting mental states. But it makes no sense to use the term "dissonance" to refer to psychological discomfort. Discomfort triggered by, say, a traumatic loss of a loved one clearly isn't

by itself a case of dissonance, in Festinger's sense. So, in the remainder of this chapter we shall use "dissonance" to refer to a discomfort in conjunction with the associated cognitive inconsistency.

Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance posits that the discrepancies between actions and attitudes toward them trigger psychological discomfort, which is resolved by either regulating or eliminating the dissonance (Festinger 1957; Festinger and Carlsmith 1959; Festinger 1964; McGrath 2017). A classic example of cognitive dissonance that is inducing attitude change is that of an addict, a heavy smoker say, who has an almost irresistible urge to continue smoking (Festinger 1957, 2, 20). The addict knows that smoking can cause lung cancer and has a strong desire not to get lung cancer. But she also knows that satisfying the latter desire would require giving up smoking, which would be very hard for her to do. Rather than living with the inconsistency between the urge to smoke and the desire not to get lung cancer, which would require giving up smoking, the addict may unconsciously engage in dissonance-reducing strategies, leading her to accept that smoking isn't really dangerous.

In their classical (induced compliance) experiment, Festinger and James Carlsmith (1959) tested Festinger's (1957) hypothesis that people automatically seek to minimize cognitive inconsistency between their actions and their attitudes toward them. They divided participants into three groups and asked them to perform a series of boring tasks such as turning pegs in a peg board for an hour. The participants thought that the experiment was over at this point. However, after they finished the task, which was rather dull and boring, the experimenter would "hire" participants from two of the groups to tell a waiting "participant" that the task was interesting, enjoyable, and lots of fun. Participants were paid either \$1 or \$20 to do the job. The waiting "participant" was a confederate of the experimenter who pretended to be a volunteer about to perform the same task. The participants in the third group served as controls and were therefore not "hired" to do anything. After finishing their job, psychology students approached the participants under the pretense of wanting to improve the psychology program and asked them whether they found the task boring or enjoyable.

Festinger and Carlsmith found that participants who had received only \$1 for lying to the waiting "participant" (the confederate) rated the boring task as more interesting and enjoyable than the participants who had received \$20 for telling the same lie. The researchers took these findings to show that participants in the \$1 condition were more likely than participants in the \$20 condition to feel less pressure to comply with the researchers' request and therefore were also more likely to feel responsible for what they told the waiting "participant." If, however, they automatically came to accept that the task was interesting and enjoyable, then what they told the waiting "participant" would not be a lie. So, Festinger and Carlsmith argued, because the participants in the \$1 condition were

more motivated than the participants in the \$20 condition to avoid the discomfort of having to take responsibility for lying, they had a greater incentive to change their mind.

As Festinger's theory predicts, when we suffer from cognitive dissonance, we tend to automatically do whatever is easiest for us to alleviate the tension. In this study, it was not an option for participants to go back in time and change what they had already told the waiting "participant." If, however, they came to regard the task as enjoyable rather than boring, then what they told the waiting "participant" would be the truth and not a lie. So, the participants in the \$1 condition effortlessly changed their minds about how they felt about the task in order to eliminate the discomfort of lying.

Festinger (1957) and many other social psychologists working on dissonance often describe the condition as an inconsistency between a behavior and an attitude. But this is hardly what they mean. Inconsistency can arise only between states that carry information, and while certain behaviors do carry information (e.g., speech), most behaviors don't. You are not trying to send a message when you are taking a shower or cleaning the oven. Many of the bodily movements psychologists refer to as "behaviors" are what philosophers call "actions," where actions are intentional behaviors (Davidson 1980). Sneezing, yawning, pocket-dialing your ex, tripping over a box left in the hallway, falling off a cliff, and accidentally leaving your friend's place with their gold lighter in your pocket are examples of behaviors that are not actions, because they lack intent. Blowing your nose, suppressing a yawn, placing a phone call to your ex, kicking a box left in the hallway, jumping off a cliff, and committing burglary, by contrast, are examples of behaviors that are also actions, because they are intentional. Although actions are coupled with intentions, and intentions are bearers of information, actions are not themselves bearers of information, unless they are used as tools for communication. This raises the question of what Festinger and other social psychologists mean when they speak of inconsistencies between behaviors and attitudes. We shall take them to mean inconsistencies between conflicting attitudes toward an action or practice, such as the inconsistency between your disapproval of lying and your apprehension of the fact that what you just did counts as lying. Thus understood, cognitive inconsistency is simply a species of ambivalence.<sup>2</sup> But for simplicity's sake, we will sometimes adopt the original terminology.

So, what exactly is the difference between ambivalence and dissonance? To get a sense of how they differ, consider this example: two students Al and Bo have to sign up for either Italian or French in order to satisfy their language requirement. Al has no special ties to Italy or the Italian language, nor to France or the French language, and doesn't really care how he satisfies his language requirement. Even so, he is indecisive about what language to pick until the time comes to hand in the form, at which point

he uses his pen as a dart and the form as a dartboard, and the pen lands on Italian. Because Al doesn't care about how he satisfies the language requirement, his ambivalence doesn't cause him any discomfort. Things are quite different with Bo. Four years after losing her Italian mother to cancer, Bo is still extremely traumatized by her loss, but she manages to function by avoiding triggers. She finds herself in a bind, because taking Italian is bound to be smack full of triggers, which makes her hesitant about taking it. At the same time, she really wants to take the class so as not to forget the Italian her mom taught her. So, as we can imagine, Bo's ambivalence is highly distressing to her and may give rise to unconscious processes aimed at reducing the distress. In the envisaged scenario, Bo's ambivalence, but not Al's, counts as cognitive dissonance.

While Festinger hypothesized that cognitive inconsistency makes us feel uncomfortable, various alternative hypotheses explaining why we experience discomfort have been proposed. For example, it has been suggested that what makes us uncomfortable is not the discrepancy *per se* but rather the fact that we feel personally responsible for the production of aversive consequences (Cooper and Fazio 1984; Taylor et al. 2000). This suggestion, however, seems perfectly consistent with Festinger's theory of dissonance. In Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) experiment, for example, participants were told to lie to a "participant" (a confederate) who they believed was waiting to complete the same tedious task. Participants in the \$1 condition felt a greater degree of responsibility for lying than participants in the \$20 condition, because they felt less pressure to comply with the experimenters' request. Thus, Festinger and Carlsmith argued that the responsibility for lying was a mediator in causing emotional distress to the participants in the \$1 condition. So, while it is true that the cognitive discrepancy wasn't the proximal cause of the psychological discomfort in this particular experimental setup, this is nevertheless consistent with it having been the distal cause of the negative affect.

To rule out that it's not the cognitive discrepancy *per se* but rather the fact that people feel personally responsible for the production of aversive consequences that make them uncomfortable, Eddie Harmon-Jones (2000) ran an induced compliance experiment similar to the one conducted by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) but devoid of any potential aversive consequences. In this experiment, participants were given a boring description of a tachistoscope taken from an equipment manual and were asked to write a statement to the effect that the boring description was actually interesting. Since there were no potentially aversive consequences in this experimental setup, participants had no reason to fear responsibility for aversive outcomes. Even so, participants who were asked to write that the boring description was actually interesting felt a greater degree of discomfort than the control group. These findings provide further support for Festinger's (1957) hypothesis that it's the cognitive inconsistency that causes the psychological discomfort and not fear

of aversive consequences. As Harmon-Jones puts it, “the results of the present experiments provide evidence that dissonance is associated with increased feelings of negative affect [i.e., discomfort] even in situations void of aversive consequences, a prediction advanced by Festinger (1957) but never demonstrated” (2000, 1498).

But cognitive inconsistency doesn't always make us uncomfortable, not even when it's brought to our attention. For example, many meat-eaters find industrialized forms of meat production appalling, yet continue to support the industry by buying its products. Bringing the discrepancy to their attention typically fails to motivate them to change. This raises the question of which kinds of cognitive inconsistency tends to make us uncomfortable, when brought to our attention. One proposal that has garnered widespread support among social psychologists is that we find a cognitive inconsistency distressing when we perceive it as a threat to our sense of self (Aronson 1968, 1999; Steele and Liu 1983; Stone, et al. 1997; Randles et al. 2015). Our sense of self stems in part from our core values, which include moral values such as being honest, sincere, empathetic, and so on. This explanation of which kinds of cognitive inconsistency tend to cause discomfort seems to support Festinger and Carlsmith's interpretation of the data from their 1959 experiment. Participants in the \$1 condition were more likely than participants in the \$20 condition to come to accept that the boring task was actually enjoyable. According to Festinger and Carlsmith (1959), the reason for this is that participants in the \$1 condition had a greater incentive than participants in the \$20 condition to change their attitude about the task because their promised wage of \$1 didn't put a lot of pressure on them to actually follow through with the job they were “hired” to do. As a result, they were more likely to feel responsible for having chosen to comply with the experimenters' request, which involved lying to the waiting “participant.” To avoid the discomfort of having to view themselves as liars, their taste for turning pegs in a peg board evidently improved for the better.

It may be thought that participants in the classical experimental setups used self-deception to resolve the dissonance. Whether self-deception is sometimes used to reduce distressing cognitive disparity has been the subject of fierce debate. Elias Khalil (2017), for example, argues that self-deception should be distinguished from dissonance resolution, because the latter involves creating delusional attitudes about one's self. As he puts it, “cognitive dissonance as relating to the gap between actual status and desired status is – ultimately – about delusional images of the self” (2017, 550). For example, if you disapprove of abortion on moral grounds, but you accidentally became pregnant and are economically unable to support a child, this may activate unconscious processes that alter your moral values. In that case, your new moral values are delusional representations of yourself. Whereas delusions are the result of automatic processes, self-deception involves a *conscious* manipulation of facts to

justify a suboptimal choice (see also Mele 2001; Scott-Kakures 2009). A victim of domestic violence may engage in self-deception by consciously rejecting certain probative facts, for example, that the abuser intends to cause her physical or psychological harm, while consciously accepting other facts for which there is no evidential support, for example, that the abuser loves her but is going through a rough time.

### **Implicit Racial Biases and Habitual Racism**

In Festinger's studies of cognitive dissonance, participants were burdened by a conflict between their disapproval of an action (e.g., they disapprove of lying) and their apprehension of the fact that they have agreed to perform that action. The distress of this sort of discrepancy typically prompts an automatic, or unconscious, shift in attitudes (e.g., they come to accept that the boring task was in fact enjoyable). In Festinger's case, it was presupposed that the participants' apprehension of the fact that they had committed themselves to perform an action of which they disapproved was consciously accessible to them. But cognitive dissonance can also be a stressful conflict between an explicit and an implicit attitude or between two implicit attitudes.

Research has shown that attitudes we rejected long ago rarely disappear without a trace. Instead they transform into implicit, or unconscious, attitudes that continue to influence our thoughts and actions (Wilson et al. 2000; Dovidio et al. 2001; Petty et al. 2006; Zayas and Shoda 2015; Zayas et al. 2017). One influential model of how past attitudes can influence current action is the Dual Attitudes Model (Wilson et al. 2000). According to this model, we have two dissociated attitude systems, an implicit and an explicit, that allow us to have inconsistent attitudes toward the same object, person, or group. When we have ample time to reflect on what to do, our new explicit attitude guides our actions, but when we respond under time pressure, or perform an automatized, unreflective action (e.g., brushing our teeth or driving to work), our old implicit attitudes assume the role of guide.

Because the Dual Attitude Model stipulates that the two attitude systems are dissociated, it cannot explain how our old rejected attitudes can come into conflict with the attitudes of which we take ownership. Richard Petty calls the conflict between our old rejected attitudes and the explicit attitudes of which we take ownership "implicit ambivalence" (Petty et al. 2006). In response to the challenge to the Dual Attitude Model, Perry and colleagues developed the so-called PAST model of the influence of past attitudes on current action (Petty et al. 2003, 2006).<sup>3</sup> Advocates of the PAST model agree with dual-attitude theorists that there are two attitude systems but they deny that the two systems are dissociated. Their model thus allows for implicit comparative assessment of explicit and implicit attitudes.



On the PAST model, when you reject an explicit attitude, you encode it with a tag that marks it “false” or “incorrect.” A former racist who has rejected his former explicit belief that black men are dangerous criminals thus encodes this belief with a tag that marks it false. So, the information that is now stored in the explicit attitude system is something along the lines of (FALSE)—tag—“BLACK MEN ARE DANGEROUS CRIMINALS.” However, when an implicit attitude of this kind makes itself known to you, it may not spontaneously appear with its tag. This may explain why former hate mongers who are now fully committed to social change can occasionally experience a flash of hostility toward those they now support (Picciolini, 2017). It also explains how discrepancies between explicit and implicit attitudes can arise.

The majority of Americans, even nonwhite Americans and social justice crusaders, have implicit racial biases toward nonwhites and other oppressed groups (Greenwald et al. 1998; Saul 2013; Beeghly and Madva 2020). Yet a substantial number of us don’t acquire implicit racial biases by disowning an explicit racist attitude. Rather, we acquire implicit racial biases by living in a society like the United States that repeatedly teaches us that whites have privileges that blacks do not have and lack many of the burdens that blacks do have. For example, blacks are 17 percent less likely than whites to get an education,<sup>4</sup> more than 5 percent more likely to go to prison,<sup>5</sup> and 40 percent more likely to be shot by a police officer.<sup>6</sup> Some 155 years after the end of slavery and 55 years after the end of the Civil Rights movement, whites still enjoy a systemic advantage over nonwhites. We are bombarded with myths and stereotypes intended to justify the inequality. The stereotype that black men are dangerous criminals may be among the most effective in terms of inserting itself into our unconscious minds. Most of us explicitly reject this information as nonsense, but it nonetheless seems to make it into our implicit attitude system, where it is able to interfere with our perceptions and evaluations of black people and the way we interact with them.

Ideally, our explicit attitudes reflect our values and are therefore genuinely our own (Watson 1975, 1996, 2004; Smith 2005; Bratman 2007a, 2007b, 48; Doris 2015; Sripada 2016, 2017; Brogaard 2020a, ch. 2). Even under this ideal, however, our explicit attitudes are continually challenged by our implicit racial biases. Although we are not directly consciously aware of our implicit biases, they have a way of interjecting themselves into our social actions in ways that are barely noticeable to us yet are discriminatory against black people. These subtle yet discriminatory actions are also known as “microaggressions” (Sue 2010; Fatima 2017; Brogaard 2020b; McClure and Regina 2020). To a first approximation, we can say that a microaggression is a subtle behavior or action triggered by an implicit bias that conveys a hostile message to the targeted person because of his or her group membership. Microaggressions can be as inconspicuous as instinctively clutching your purse as you pass a black

man on the sidewalk, mistaking a black doctor for the janitor, suggesting to a black coworker who is struggling and is seeking your advice that hard work guarantees success, or a slight hesitation before shaking the hand of the black financial advisor who greets you at the bank.

Realizing that our old racial biases – attitudes we no longer identify with – still run parts of our lives can be a source of psychological distress (e.g., in the form of shame, embarrassment, or horror). For example, suppose you grew up in a racist family in a racist town and entered young adulthood explicitly believing that nonwhites are lesser humans than whites and that they therefore must be under the rule of white people. As you enter college, however, you surround yourself with liberal friends who challenge you, and by the end of your junior year, you have rejected and disowned your former racist beliefs and replaced them with egalitarian beliefs. At least that's how it looks to you. Unbeknownst to you, however, you haven't actually eradicated your racist beliefs. They are simply hiding in the dark corners of your unconscious mind, where you can no longer access them. Your intentions and actions are often shaped by your egalitarian beliefs. You are out on the streets protesting for justice each time another black man is shot or strangled to death by the police or by a modern-day lynch mob. But sometimes your actions are influenced and biased by your implicit racist beliefs, although you're blissfully ignorant of this. For example, when you buy cigarettes at the local convenience store, and the person who works the register is black, you unknowingly hesitate before accepting the change (Sue 2010, 71). One day a friend tags along to the store and notices your hesitation when the black person working the register hands you the change. Your friend calls you out on it. At first you deny that your hesitation has anything to do with the skin color of the person working the register. But when it happens again, you start noticing a pattern, and eventually acknowledge that it must be the case that your old rejected racial biases still have a hold on you. As this knowledge paints you as a person you don't recognize and don't want to be, you are absolutely horrified.

The discomfort you experience in the envisaged scenario upon realizing that you still harbor your old racial biases is a case of cognitive dissonance similar to the cognitive dissonance investigated by Festinger. We can call psychological distress in response to disowned attitudes that come back to haunt us "implicit cognitive dissonance" (see also Petty et al. 2006; Petty and Briñol 2008; Zayas et al. 2017). How we respond to the psychological distress we experience when we get a glimpse into our implicit biases by scrutinizing our microaggression is highly variable. People who have undergone implicit bias training are likely to be more self-conscious about how they act in similar situations in the future (FitzGerald et al. 2019). But a more common self-protective response is to deny in all sincerity that one's behavior was microaggressive. You might adamantly reject the thought that you hesitated before reaching for the

change because the person working the register is black, for example, by soliciting some unconscious process resulting in you becoming convinced that you hesitated because you were absent-minded for a brief moment.

Microaggression is so-called because of its subtlety. But our implicit racial biases can in rare instances lead to racial violence that is not racially motivated. Suppose a white veteran police officer pulls over a black driver for speeding late at night. As she walks toward the car, the driver jumps out of the car and points a shiny object that looks like a gun at her. By sheer coincidence, gunshots are fired in the woods next to the road at that very instant. Believing the driver is threatening her, the officer grabs her gun, shoots, and kills the driver. As she gets closer, she realizes that what had looked like a gun to her was, in fact, a cell phone. Until then, she had never fired her weapon and had a record of exemplary behavior. Even so, we can imagine that she was driven to shoot the black driver because of her implicit racial biases. Her implicit racial bias associating blacks with criminality may have distorted her perception, which is to say that if the driver had been white, she would not have seen the cell phone as a gun and would not have been motivated to shoot.

The thought that our implicit racial biases can radically distort our perception is backed by science and philosophy (Payne et al. 2002; Eberhardt et al. 2004; Siegel 2016; Brogaard 2020b).<sup>7</sup> In studies in which volunteers were exposed to images of people holding either a gun or another object, it was found that they were much more likely to see the object as a gun when the person was black (Payne 2001, 2005, 2006; Payne et al. 2002; Eberhardt et al. 2004). Similar perceptual mistakes have also been observed in real-life situations. For example, in 2014, a white off-duty police officer fatally shot a black teenager, Vonderrit Myers Jr., in St. Louis. The officer claimed that Myers fired a gun and that he responded by firing 17 times, killing Myers, but witnesses reported that he was carrying a sandwich.<sup>8</sup> Over the years, various ordinary objects such as a remote control, a spatula, a hair clip, keys, wallets, and so forth, have been mistaken by police for guns, prompting fatal shootings of black people. These incidents caught the attention of documentarian Michael Moore, who devoted an entire segment of his television series *The Awful Truth* to this very topic in 2000.<sup>9</sup>

Studies also point to perceptual biases regarding black men's and boy's physical size (Wilson et al. 2017). Black boys are seen as older, less innocent, and they tend to prompt a less essential conception of childhood than do their white counterparts (Goff et al. 2014). Such perceptual mistakes seem to be a contributing factor in police killings. For example, Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old black boy who was killed by Cleveland police while playing with a toy gun in a city park, was described by prosecutors as "big" for his age, and as someone who could easily have "passed for someone older."<sup>10</sup> As we will see below, it is unlikely that perceptual distortion can fully explain why the Cleveland police officers "snuck up"

on Rice and shot him immediately upon arriving on the scene. But it seems to have contributed to the officers having adopted bigoted police practices, or habits.

It's possible that police shootings at least in some cases can be traced solely to officers' racially biased perception. This is so in our envisaged case in which the white veteran police officer, who served for decades without incident, fatally shot a black man because her implicit racial biases caused her to mistakenly perceive the black man as a serious threat to her life. Because she thought the black man presented an imminent threat to her life, she intentionally shot the black man, yet her action was not racially motivated.

As we will now argue, however, there is reason to believe that such cases are rare. On the two most influential accounts of implicit biases, implicit biases are either unconscious, stored attitudes or encoded concepts that tend to be co-activated (see Mandelbaum, 2016). We want to propose a third account of implicit biases, according to which they are habits, where a habit is to be understood as a skill-like disposition to act in a particular way in particular situations. Although we will not be able to argue for it here, we don't think the three conceptions of implicit bias are mutually exclusive. Rather, it seems plausible that they reflect different ways that we can harbor implicit biases. An implicit racial bias that is manifested as a habit is an inclination to repeatedly and "skillfully" engage in racist acts.

When people act on implicit racial biases that are encoded as habits, we will now argue, their actions are racially motivated. Our argument turns on a close parallel between habitual racial actions and irreflective skilled actions (Brogaard 2020b). Irreflective skilled actions are actions that (i) involve mastery of a given skill, such as tying your shoes, swimming or driving to work; and (ii) unfold without the agent explicitly thinking about what she is doing (Brownstein 2014; see also Marcel 2003; Velleman 2008; Railton 2009; Annas 2011; Brogaard 2020b). A professional golfer's effortless golf swing is a prime example of an irreflective skilled action. Research has shown that when professional golf players are asked to consciously reflect on what they are doing, they don't perform as well as when they act on their skill without reflecting on it (Flegal and Anderson 2008; Bell and Hardy 2009). But it's not just people with a very specialized expertise who engage in irreflective skilled actions. In fact, it is part of everyday life. When you brush your teeth, tie your sneakers, or drive to work, you are typically performing irreflective skilled actions. What's interesting about irreflective skilled actions is that although they are unconscious and not preceded by deliberation, they are nonetheless intentional, or agential, actions. You don't accidentally or unknowingly brush your teeth, tie your sneakers, or drive to work. You perform these acts automatically yet fully intending to perform them. Indeed, it's not just the initiation of the action that's intended; the

sub-actions that make up the larger action are carried out with intent. For example, when you drive to work, and take the correct exit to get off the highway, you do so intentionally, even if you are completely absorbed in thoughts about a paper you are writing and therefore are not aware of taking the exit at the time. Likewise, when tying your sneakers and you make a loop with one of the laces and wrap it around the other lace, you do so intentionally, even if you are chatting with your roommate and therefore are unaware of the sub-actions that go into tying your shoes. Irreflective skilled actions are thus intentional, or agential. But they are not governed all the way by *conscious* intentions.

Our proposal is that implicit racial biases can be manifested as habits that can elicit an unconscious intention to perform a racist act. Suppose you are playing on the street when Rhyland, a black kid from your neighborhood, tosses a baseball in your direction, thereby signaling that he wants you to toss it back to him.<sup>11</sup> You harbor an implicit dislike of black kids and often start fights with the black kids in the neighborhood. You have never been in a fight with Rhyland, however. He usually keeps to himself. So, when Rhyland tosses the baseball in your direction, you decide to toss it back. However, owing to your implicit dislike of black kids, you put an excessive amount of force into your throw and aim in the direction of Rhyland's face. The ball nearly hits him in the face. In this case, your forceful throw is quite unlike "reflex-like" behavior that lacks intention and mindful guidance, such as your instinctive clutching of your purse when passing a black man on the sidewalk. Rather, your action exemplifies your habitual behavior of being aggressive towards black kids. Aggressing against black kids is something you do regularly. On a conscious level, you merely intended to toss the baseball back to Rhyland, but this intention by itself does not suffice for your brain's action system to generate a motor representation. Your brain's action system is not in the business of arbitrarily deciding between a throw with a force that can knock someone out and a gentle toss. It needs guidance by a finer-grained intention in order for it to compute the precise physical parameters (e.g., the exact force and trajectory) required for the execution of the action. Of course, intentions can misfire. You can intend to throw the ball gently, yet accidentally throw it hard. This can happen because you lack the skill or the ability to exercise it. If, however, you have the skill and the ability to throw the ball in a skilled manner, which we can assume that you do, then your throwing the ball back to Rhyland with considerable force was an intentional action, even if you were unaware of intending to put excessive force into the throw.

It is plausible that implicit racial biases can also be the basis of racially biased routines in policing. For example, it may become routine behavior for a police officer to behave much more aggressively toward blacks than whites or to shoot black suspects immediately upon arriving on the scene but only shoot white suspects after determining that their life is in

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imminent danger. Suppose a white police veteran, who has a long history of routinely using excessive force when responding to incidents involving black men, shoots an unarmed black man. It seems implausible that his shooting can be explained purely in terms of his implicit racial biases. A better explanation is that his implicit racial biases are manifested as a racial habit, eliciting an unconscious intention to shoot the black man. His actions here are indeed racially motivated. A similar explanation seems plausible in the case of the police officers who shot Tamir Rice. In spite of the fact that the 911 caller warned the police twice that the pistol was likely fake, the police officers who responded to the call drove into the grass area very close to the gazebo where Tamir was playing and immediately opened fire at close range. They did not use the police megaphone to ask Tamir to drop what may have appeared to be a gun, nor did they make any attempt to ascertain whether he was a threat through observation or questioning. One of the officers, Timothy Loehmann, had been deemed unfit for duty at a previous police department in Independence, Ohio. But while in the process of being fired, he resigned and joined the Cleveland police department, which failed to review his personnel file.<sup>12</sup>

The way that Tamir Rice was hunted down and killed is eerily similar to the more recent killing of Rayshard Brooks on June 12, 2020. Brooks had fallen asleep in his car outside a Wendy's drive-through in Atlanta after a night of drinking. For the first hour, Brooks fully complied with the requests of the responding officers. But when they decided to arrest him, Brooks wrestled them, grabbed the taser from one of the officers and took off running. Garrett Rolfe, one of the officers, fired three shots and two of them hit Brooks in the back. Rolfe had been implicated in multiple other incidents prior to the killing of Brooks, including a shooting in 2015.

Loehmann and Rolfe are not exceptions to an otherwise well-functioning police system in the United States. As reported by *The Washington Post*, 50 officers implicated in shootings in 2015 had also been implicated in previous shootings.<sup>13</sup> There is, of course, no way to tell without access to extensive investigative details whether Loehmann and Rolfe acted as they did due to acquired biasing habits, such as the habits of shooting black (but not white) suspects at close range immediately upon arriving on the scene, or shooting black (but not white) men who are running away and don't possess a lethal weapon. But it's a likely scenario when the perpetrator is a repeat offender. When an action is shaped by a biasing habit, then the action is racially motivated, even if the motive and corresponding intentions are unconscious.

Because of the ramifications of police misconduct, it is unlikely that habitual racists will openly admit that they acted the way they did because the victim was black. They may not even admit guilt to themselves. In more mundane cases, we have the ability to retrieve the covert intentions that guide our irreflective skilled actions. Following Elizabeth Anscombe

(1957 [2000]), a hallmark of intention is the ability to answer questions like “What were you doing?” or “Why were you doing it?” Suppose that you always take the same route to work. One day on your way to work, where you are deeply absorbed in a paper you are working on, you are pulled over by a moral philosopher pressing on the Anscombian questions. “What were you just doing?” and “Why were you doing it?” Despite not being conscious of your intentions when you took the left turn, you would most likely reply with “I was talking a left turn, because I am on my way to work.” After all, your left turn was no mistake or accident. However, if a habitual racist were asked similar questions, say, “Why did you shoot the kid immediately upon arriving on the scene?” or “Why didn’t you inspect the scene before shooting?”, he would be unlikely to reply with “Because he was a *black* suspect.” Instead, he might reply with “I was certain that he was going to shoot me.”

Habitual racists thus might reply in exactly the same way as the female police officer in our envisaged case, who intentionally killed the black driver but whose action wasn’t racially motivated. The difference between inadvertent bigots and habitual racists is that the latter’s answers (even if sincere) are confabulations, that is, delusions about yourself and your values (Sullivan-Bissett 2015; Khalil 2017). Habitual racists explicitly disapprove of shooting at suspects unless it’s clear that there is an imminent threat to their life. Yet they habitually shoot at unarmed, non-threatening black people, who are suspected of having committed a petty crime or who are simply just black. Habitual racists are unable to face their habitual racism, because this would poke holes in their bubble of delusion about who they are and what they stand for. To avoid the distress that would elicit, they automatically assume that they must have been acting in response to what they took to be an imminent threat to their life.

Although habitual racists act intentionally when they engage in racist violence, the question remains whether their racist acts are expressions of their values. While intention suffices for an action to be agential in a minimal Davidsonian sense, self-determination, or self-governing agency, requires that the action be an expression of the actor’s values (Watson 1975, 1996, 2004; Smith, 2005; Bratman 2007a, 2007b, 48; Doris 2015; Sripada 2016, 2017; Brogaard 2020a, ch. 2). When you are driving to work absentmindedly and intentionally make a left turn, your action does indeed express your values. But it may seem that habitual racists disvalue their racist actions, as they explicitly deny them. However, as we have seen, their denial is the result of the delusion about themselves and their values. Their implicit racist attitudes conflict with socially acceptable attitudes, causing a physiological stress response. This activates unconscious processes, leading to a delusional representation of themselves. However, their true values are indeed reflected by their racist actions, despite their denial. As Abraham Lincoln once said, actions speak louder than words.

The harm inflicted on unarmed, non-threatening black people by habitual racists is both racially motivated and an expression of their self-governing agency. But there are cases of racial violence that are even more egregious than those committed by habitual racists, namely those committed by explicit racists. We address this issue next.

### Explicit Racism, Cognitive Dissonance, and Social Taboos

Explicit racism is often dealt with as if it were a thing of the past. Unfortunately, the idea that explicit racism has gone extinct is a myth. It may no longer be endemic, but it's difficult to determine its current prevalence, as its strong social disapproval probably would skew answers even on anonymous questionnaires. But every so often, explicit racism sticks out like a sore thumb. The recent horrific murder of George Floyd is a case in point.

Civil rights activists like Jesse Jackson and Van Jones have referred to the recent killings of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd as modern-day lynchings.<sup>14</sup> In the video of the brutal murder of Floyd, which was recorded by a young bystander, police officer Derek Chauvin is seen kneeling on Floyd's neck, compressing his airway, while three other officers keep guard. In a *déjà vu* of the police killing of Eric Garner in 2014 and Derek Scott in 2019, Floyd repeatedly gasps "I can't breathe," and then, "I'm about to die."<sup>15</sup> Almost eight minutes into the video, Floyd's pleas for help go quiet, and a person nearby can be heard saying, "They just killed him." The whole time, Chauvin looks complacent and self-righteous, one hand in his pocket. It's almost as if he derives erotic pleasure from causing a black man to suffer and die.

The same look of pleasure and smugness could be seen in the faces of the executioners and spectators at the spectacle lynchings of Jim Crow America.<sup>16</sup> In his short story "Going to Meet the Man" (1965), Black writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin masterly demonstrates the perverted nature of Jim Crow racism. At the outset of the story, Jesse, a racist deputy sheriff, is lying in bed with his wife, Grace, initially unable to achieve an erection. Jesse's mind wanders back to a lynching he witnessed as a young child. The black victim – who is viewed by young Jesse as "the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then" – is approached by a knife-wielding chieftain, who erotically weighs, cradles, stretches and caresses his testicles before he proceeds to brutally castrate him.

The mob's and the spectators' simultaneous attraction to and aversion toward black bodies is revealing for what it tells us about the logic of racism: while racial violence is motivated by antagonistic emotions toward black people (e.g., disgust, hatred, or contempt), a further incentive behind racial violence is the arousal elicited in the mob and the spectators in response to the violation of a black body.



The sexual arousal experienced by the racist characters in Baldwin's story in relation to black bodies is evidently a source of shame for them, as can be seen from their repeated attempts to hide this fact from themselves and each other. For example, at one point in the story, Jesse recounts a recent episode in a jail cell, where he is assaulting a young black protester who has been arrested. His violation of the young protester, the cattle prod to his testicles, its sexual nature, is a source of sexual arousal: "to his bewilderment, his horror, he felt himself violently stiffen—with no warning at all" (1965, 235). The fact that Jesse is both surprised and horrified by his sudden erection suggests that his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion toward black bodies has thus far eluded him on a conscious level, which is what we should expect. When he realizes that he has an erection, there is a brief moment where he feels ashamed. Now lying in bed with his wife, his recollections of the sexualized lynching ritual and his sudden erection in the jail cell, he is weighed down by his shame, which makes it difficult for him to achieve an erection.

Jesse's initial response to his distress appears to follow the patterns found in the controlled studies of cognitive dissonance. Recall that the subjects in the experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) felt less pressure to lie in the \$1 condition than the \$20 condition and therefore felt more guilty about their decision to lie than participants in the \$20 condition. To alleviate that discomfort, they unconsciously accepted that they actually enjoyed the task, thus eliminating the inconsistency between how they initially felt about the task and the lie they told the waiting "participant." In a similar fashion, Jesse has, up until this point in the story, been able to avoid feeling shame by convincing himself that an honorable motive underpins his racist practices rather than primitive, animalistic lust. One hitherto effective strategy for silencing his shame is to convince himself that blacks lack inherent moral worth and thus do not automatically deserve to be treated with the respect owed to white people.

But this dissonance-reducing strategy no longer works for him. So, he resolves to alleviate the discomfort presented by his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion by black bodies by temporarily transforming himself into a "black animal," expressing wild animal sounds of sexual arousal: "He thought of the boy in the cell; he thought of the man in the fire; he thought of the knife and grabbed himself and stroked himself and a terrible sound something between a high laugh and a howl, came out of him and dragged his sleeping wife up on one elbow" (Baldwin 1965, 1761).

His transformation from man to animal is a kind of make-belief, but it succeeds in resolving the discomfort. Not only is he able to achieve an erection, but he is, in fact, so sexually aroused that he forces himself on his wife, whispering, "Come on, sugar, I'm going to do you like a nigger; just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me like you love a nigger"

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(1965, 244). While raping his wife, "labor[ing] harder than he ever had before," his mind wanders back to the morning after the lynching, once again hearing the sounds of "the first cock crow, and the dogs bark, and the tires on the gravel road" (1965, 249).

Baldwin wrote his story during the Civil Rights movement more than half a century ago. Before the Civil Rights movement, black people were treated as lacking human status or inherent worth; their value resided in their utility as a tool for satisfying the abnormal, sexual fetishes of white men. Unfortunately, this is not just a dark chapter in American history. It is modern-day horror. In the video of the Floyd killing, officer Chauvin seems to experience a similar kind of almost erotic thrill from his position of supremacy while kneeling on Floyd's neck, torturing him to death. Chauvin's contentful expression seems to reflect the satisfaction that derives from the fulfillment of a desire – in this case a desire to see black people suffer – as well as satisfaction that derives from the reassertion of his power over black people *qua* white man and police officer.

The discrepancy in this case does not lie in a conflict between implicit racial biases and explicit attitudes. Rather, it lies in the conflict between the satisfaction Chauvin derives from punishing a black man and the acute stress response that automatically occurs when taking the life of another human being.<sup>17</sup> Since it's a social taboo to take pleasure in killing, it is likely that Chauvin deploys an dissonance-reducing strategy to avoid feeling ashamed, for example, by reiterating to himself that his brutal act is based on an honorable motive, such as that of punishing a black man for his inherent criminal nature.

The implicit cognitive dissonance that lies at the heart of explicit racism is one of the main obstacles to opening the eyes of explicit racists to the morally questionable nature of their actions. Unlike most people, explicit racists cling to their blinkered ideological beliefs about the inferiority of blacks – a narrative that conceals the fact that the motive behind their racist acts often is a combination of the thrill of feeling powerful and in control and the satisfaction of the desire to punish members of the oppressed group.

There are no doubt explicit racists who are true sadistic psychopaths (think of the Nazis gassing the Jews or experimenting on them). But most perpetrators of racial violence are likely products of a culture of systemic racism that condones the system-wide oppression of blacks. We all have the parasite of racism living inside of us due to this culture, but we are not all active executioners. Explicit racists, like Baldwin's Jesse or Chauvin and his colleagues, are deviant products of systemic racism, who take out their hate-proneness and aggressive tendencies on black people, because they take for granted that they will get away with violating "secondary citizens." Sadly, they do indeed get away with it all too often.



them, thus making us feel less uncomfortable because they now deserve the favor.

These findings suggest a strategy for using cognitive dissonance to help curtail habitual and explicit racism. The idea would be to create opportunities for racists to act in ways that conflict with their racist attitudes. These opportunities could be as simple as a supervisor requesting a white racist employee to complete a task for a black coworker or as complex as a college teacher asking a white racist student to work on a slavery reparation project.

## Notes

- 1 There is no consensus as to whether implicit biases are attitudes, associations, or something different entirely. See Mandelbaum (2016).
- 2 There are various other types of ambivalence (see "The Philosophical and Psychological Significance of Ambivalence: An Introduction," this volume). The most debated type is ambivalence about what to do (Frankfurt, 1999). But we can also be ambivalent about what to think or feel about historical or future events and hypothetical situations, to mention just a few (see Brunero, this volume).
- 3 "PAST" is an acronym for "Past Attitudes Are Still There" (Petty et al. 2006).
- 4 Martha Ross, "Back to school is a mixed picture for U.S. young adults." *The Avenue* (Brookings, September 1, 2015). [www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2015/09/01/back-to-school-a-mixed-picture-for-u-s-young-adults/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2015/09/01/back-to-school-a-mixed-picture-for-u-s-young-adults/). Retrieved on June 1, 2020.
- 5 NAACP, Criminal Justice Fact Sheet. [www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/](http://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/). Retrieved on May 30, 2020.
- 6 Heather Mac Donald (Commentary), "Black and Unarmed: Behind the Numbers: What the Black Lives Matter movement misses about those police shootings." *The Marshall Project*, Feb. 8, 2016. [www.themarshallproject.org/2016/02/08/black-and-unarmed-behind-the-numbers#.Q7oNSdUOj](http://www.themarshallproject.org/2016/02/08/black-and-unarmed-behind-the-numbers#.Q7oNSdUOj). Retrieved on June 5, 2020.
- 7 Firestone and Scholl (2016) were unable to replicate the results of studies showing that racial biases can cognitively penetrate vision for perception. This, however, leaves it open that implicit biases may influence vision for action (see Brogaard, 2020b).
- 8 Alan Blinder, "New outcry unfolds after St. Louis officer kills black teenager." *The New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2014. [www.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/us/st-louis-police-shooting-protests.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/10/us/st-louis-police-shooting-protests.html). Retrieved June 5, 2020.
- 9 *The Awful Truth* TV series, episode "Compassionate conservative night," segment "Don't shoot, it's only a wallet," May 24, 2000. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Awful\\_Truth\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Awful_Truth_(TV_series)). Retrieved May, 20, 2020.
- 10 Christopher Ingraham, "Why white people see black boys like Tamir Rice as older, bigger and guiltier than they really are." *The Washington Post*, Dec. 28, 2015. [www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/28/why-prosecutors-keep-talking-about-tamir-rices-size-36-pants/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/12/28/why-prosecutors-keep-talking-about-tamir-rices-size-36-pants/). Retrieved May 31, 2020.
- 11 This example is borrowed from Brogaard (2020b).
- 12 Christine Mai-Duc, "Cleveland officer who killed Tamir Rice had been deemed unfit for duty." *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 3, 2014. [www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-cleveland-tamir-rice-timothy-loehmann-20141203-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-cleveland-tamir-rice-timothy-loehmann-20141203-story.html). Retrieved June 5, 2020.

- 13 Alexander, K.L., "For 55 officers involved in fatal shootings this year, it wasn't their first time." *The Washington Post*, Dec. 15, 2015. [www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/for-55-officers-involved-in-fatal-shootings-this-year-it-wasnt-their-first-time/2015/12/22/435cb680-9d04-11e5-a3c5-c77f2cc5a43c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/for-55-officers-involved-in-fatal-shootings-this-year-it-wasnt-their-first-time/2015/12/22/435cb680-9d04-11e5-a3c5-c77f2cc5a43c_story.html). Retrieved May 25, 2015.
- 14 Jemma Carr, "Civil rights activist Jesse Jackson condemns George Floyd death as a 'lynching in broad daylight' and calls for Minneapolis Police Department to 'cleanse itself, inside and out'." *DailyMail.com*, May 29, 2020, [www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8369195/Jesse-Jackson-condemns-George-Floyd-death-lynching-broad-daylight.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8369195/Jesse-Jackson-condemns-George-Floyd-death-lynching-broad-daylight.html). Retrieved June 1, 2020; The Lead with Jake Tapper (video), "Van Jones: 'That was a lynching of a black man in broad daylight.'" [www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2020/05/28/lead-panel-1-live-jake-tapper.cnn](http://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2020/05/28/lead-panel-1-live-jake-tapper.cnn). Retrieved June 1, 2020.
- 15 Mirna Alsharif, "Eric Garner's mother says George Floyd's death feels like déjà vu." *CNN*, Wed., May 27, 2020. [www.cnn.com/2020/05/27/us/eric-garner-mother-reax-floyd/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2020/05/27/us/eric-garner-mother-reax-floyd/index.html). Retrieved on June 1, 2020.
- 16 This analysis of James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man" is based on work in progress with Aleks Hernandez.
- 17 Even psychopathic serial killers have been found to experience this acute stress response, which is the automatic physiological response to the activation of the sympathetic nervous system (see Brogaard 2020a, ch. 4). It is this acute stress response that enables them to experience sexual pleasure.

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