Injustice within Systems of Coordination and Cognition
Comment on Madva for Brains Blog

Common Ground?

I am delighted to have been asked to comment on Alex Madva's paper, "A Plea for Anti-Anti-Individualism: How Oversimple Psychology Misleads Social Policy." I think we are largely in agreement on the main points of his essay. I would agree, in particular, with two points. First, both individual and structural changes are needed to achieve social justice, and that "it is an open-ended empirical question which specific interventions will be most conducive to which social changes." (6) Second, as he puts it, "psychological change does not come along for free with structural change" (19), and that the best approach is to "urge prioritizing among symbiotic bundles of individual-structural reforms, wherein changes in structures and in hearts and minds work in tandem" (20).

Let me take a moment to clarify some of the points I was trying to make in my earlier work, since I didn't intend to suggest that efforts to promote structural change should have priority over *all* efforts at changing hearts and minds. I was specifically concerned in the paper Madva quotes (Haslanger 2015) with a recent emphasis on implicit bias as the best explanation of social injustice. My point was that this is a simplistic approach. It is simplistic with respect to *how* individuals contribute to injustice, not just in the focus on individuals. As I read Madva, he would agree with this point. Moreover, it was never my intention to suggest that structural change of any sort should be prioritized over individual change of any sort. And, to be honest, I doubt that any of the authors Madva cites would make that claim. I take it to be obvious that some structural changes will be ineffective and others will risk backlash that will make things worse overall, and that we will usually need prejudice reduction amongst elites to be successful in even attempting structural change. I don't think these are where the disagreements between the structural prioritizers and Madva lie.

In fact, I'm not entirely sure where they lie. Madva raises two criticisms of the structural prioritizers that I'd like to reflect on further, for doing so may help illuminate the issues. The first is the idea that successful forward-looking remedies need not be grounded in a backward-looking analysis: "…it could be that climate change is the primary cause of the spread of a certain disease, but that the response to prioritize is to disseminate vaccines rather than to try to make the planet colder" (6). (I'm not actually sure if the point is that we don't need a backward-looking analysis or if it is just that the best remedy may not be to remove the cause.) The second is the claim that structural prioritizers depend on a "mirror" account of hearts and minds that is "unduly passive."

Looking forward and looking back

As I read the structural prioritizers, part of their concern is that many of those who focus on individual bias or prejudice fail to see the systematic and self-perpetuating nature of inequality. On the individualist approach I took to be the target, people in the dominant group somehow developed "bad attitudes" – maybe this was due to overgeneralization (or over-essentialization) from a limited sample, or deep psychological tendencies to regard certain others as dangerous or inferior, or a failure of compassion (e.g., Garcia 1996, Appiah 1990 , Blum 2002, Hirschfeld 1996; cf. Mills 2003, Shelby 2002). These bad attitudes, and the epistemic/moral failings that gave rise to them, are the proper site of critique, for if we can remedy these cognitive failures, we can (with additional social/political change) overcome injustice.

In my experience, many who enthusiastically embraced implicit bias as an explanation of injustice seemed to be falling into this individualism, or we might say, psychologism. (Note that they too might be charged with the fault of thinking that their analysis of etiology dictates the remedy.)

The structural prioritizers do not disagree that there are cognitive and emotional failings, but want to emphasize that these failings are systematically produced and reinforced by the very cultural and material conditions that they create. In fact, some of the "bad attitudes" are reasonable responses to evidence, not epistemic failings; some are even true, so their "badness" is not epistemic (or not representational). On this view, a substantial part of the problem is in the world we are conscientiously trying to understand, not just in failings of our hearts and minds.

Consider a homeostatic system such as stick in a stream held against a rock by the backwash. A stick floats down the stream and cannot pass over the rock because each time it approaches the rock, it is
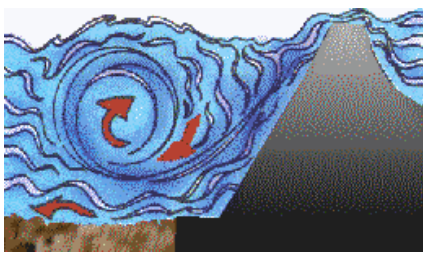
dragged down into the churning water that the rock produces. Ecosystems are homeostatic systems. Our bodies are homeostatic systems (body temperature regulation is a standard example). Plausibly, any stable society is a dynamic homeostasis. The economy, the culture, the geographic conditions, the food supply, the legal system, transportation system etc., function to enable individuals to coordinate. The system is stable but dynamic. Changes in climate, or laws, or the economy, can prompt development: the adjustments in response to changes in a part don't always return the system exactly to the original state but can allow a shift to new terms of coordination.

Individual attitudes play a role in the social system. Some attitudes are a response to the world we are together navigating, and some parts of the world are a response to our attitudes. Industrial agriculture and its environmental effects are a response to our taste for meat, dairy, and bio-fuel. Our taste for meat, dairy, and bio-fuel is fostered by their cheap availability resulting from industrial agriculture. There is a looping effect. The structural prioritizers take our attitudes to be one part of the system of social stratification. There are multiple mechanisms that stably position groups hierarchically with respect to wealth, status, power, autonomy, health, etc. We cooperate within these hierarchies and in doing so, reproduce them. The structural prioritizers are trying to emphasize that the reasons our attitudes are hard to change is not just a matter of our psychology. The social world tends to confirm them because those very attitudes have driven its construction.

Madva worries, however, that we should not look backwards to the etiology of our attitudes in order to correct them. However, if our attitudes are systematically reinforced by the social milieu, then our looking backwards is also a way to look forwards: in order to be successful we have to anticipate the ways in which the system will undermine our efforts. If you ignore the looping effects of social systems, then your attempted remedies are likely to be wasted. This is consistent, however, with Madva's claim that correction isn't always a matter of eliminating the cause. Understanding how the system works may prompt interventions that entirely circumvent the mechanisms currently in place. But you still need a backward-looking analysis to know what the mechanisms are.

Mirroring

Madva suggests that implicit (and sometimes explicit) in the structural prioritizers' analysis is a commitment to "mirroring" that has been "thoroughly debunked" (25). MIRROR is the claim that "our

biases are "mirror-like reflections" of the social world," and that "[w]e are passively, involuntarily, and perhaps unconsciously socialized into acquiring these undesirable biases by being bombarded with stereotypes in mass media and by observing that people from specific social groups are more likely to occupy specific roles, have specific jobs, live in specific areas, and so on" (22). This may seem a plausible criticism, given the model I sketched in the previous section. The fact that our attitudes are reinforced by the social world is why they are hard to change. However, there are two confusions here. First, on the structural prioritizers view, many of the relevant attitudes are *true*, not straightforwardly biased: the point is that the social world has been created to conform to what we believe. Women actually are more submissive than men; we are better caregivers than men; we are better at multi-tasking too. This is not to say that this is true "by women's nature" but because of the social history of gender. This is why it is hard to change our attitudes, and the inferences people make from them, without changing the world. Second, Madva assumes a simplistic model of passive mirroring lies behind the structural prioritizers psychology. In fact, however, the most promising model is one that places collaborative agency at the center.

All parties to this debate acknowledge that cognition involves shortcuts, selection, and compartmentalization; we cannot manage without this. There is less agreement about how and why such selection occurs. Plausibly, socialization shapes our cognition so we are better able to coordinate and communicate. For example, ostension requires being able to narrow the range of possible referents. Coordination requires that we attend and respond to the right signals, filtering out the noise, to do our part in the plan. Mindshaping through participation in practices is a necessary part of entering a world that is cognized in ways that makes sense to others; meaning systems depend on capacities of co-regulation. (McGeer 2007; Zawidzki 2013) In Tad Zawidzki's words:

> ...distinctively human social cognition is...a group accomplishment, involving simultaneously interpretive and regulative frameworks that function to shape minds, which these frameworks can then be used to easily and usefully interpret. (2013, xiii)

On this approach, the mind does not passively "mirror" the world. Rather, we are engaged in complex cooperative and signaling practices that require cognitive coordination, and we teach each other what matters in order to participate with others. If in my milieu pointing the soles of the feet towards someone is a sign of disrespect, then I am highly sensitive to the direction of one's feet and teach my children to be sensitive to it too, either explicitly or implicitly. But social meanings are not just a matter of convention. Language points us beyond what we know because one of its fundamental purposes is to organize us in relation to how things are in the world. We notice water because water is important for human life; we create signs and symbols for water in order to coordinate in finding and distributing water. The interplay between social coordination and tracking the world crucial, for language is a tool for co-regulation around things that matter.

There is nothing passive about this. Active engagement with the world and with each other is the basis for cognition. And creativity and resistance is also part of the picture. Jack Balkin's work *Cultural Software* is a valuable resource for exploring this idea:

> Culture and cultural tools enable us to treat other individuals as persons and to negotiate (and struggle over) shared meanings with them. Language is perhaps the best example of this sort of tool.... An important feature of cultural toolmaking, then, is to share with, negotiate with, and struggle with others as others. We use cultural tools to communicate with others, play with others, care for others, work with others, and fight with others. (Balkin 1998, 26)

If coordination is the point (allowing that attempts at coordination also involves points of discord and conflict), then cognitive agency is central: individual minds coordinate with other individual minds and the world on terms that are always up for negotiation. Sometimes we negotiate with others over the terms, other times we unilaterally change the world to force a renegotiation, and yet other times, the world changes and forces us all to come up with something new.

Conclusion

My suspicion is that the structural prioritizers are taking aim at an approach to social change that is more simplistic than anything Madva himself would even consider. Some of us have been engaged in the debate over individual/structural analyses of social injustice before the discussion of implicit bias was even on the horizon, and this has very likely affected our uptake of the new research. For those who identify racism with a set of attitudes, the main issue in combating racism will be how to change attitudes. But the structural prioritizers think don't think racism is a set of attitudes, but instead is a systematic structure of racial subordination. It is not surprising, then, if the structural prioritizers think that to end racism we have to dismantle society as we know it an attitudes are not the highest priority. This isn't just about what is effective, but what ending racism consists in.

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