

ON THE ALLEGED INADEQUACY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF RACISM¹

Abstract: In this article, we examine and rebut some of the most important arguments in support of the claim that psychological explanations are doomed to inadequacy or worse, given the agendas of those concerned with race and racism. We focus on three arguments made by sociologist David Wellman, and we show that the worries Wellman articulates, and we suspect some philosophers also hold, are unfounded. There is no reason to think that psychological explanations of race are inadequate, obstructive, or corrosive.

Philosophers and other researchers interested in race have often ignored the explanations of racism developed by psychologists (for some recent exceptions, see Glasgow 2009; Blum forthcoming). We have argued elsewhere that this disregard of psychology has impoverished the arguments and considerations philosophers have relied upon (Faucher and Machery 2009; Kelly et al. in press). However, not everyone agrees with our assessment: Other researchers dismiss psychology from philosophical discussions about race, explicitly claiming that psychological explanations are doomed to inadequacy or worse, given the agendas of those concerned with race and racism.

Our goal in this article is to examine and rebut some of the most important arguments in support of this cluster of claims. We will mainly discuss sociologist David Wellman's (2007) work. We focus on Wellman's arguments because contrary to other philosophers or social scientists, many of whom simply toss psychology aside as irrelevant or naïve, he engages with, and is admirably explicit about what he sees as the shortcomings of, psychological explanations of racism.

Accordingly, Section 1 will review Wellman's claims and arguments against psychological explanations of racism. Each remaining section, then, focuses on one claim in turn, and lays out our reasons for rejecting it. In Section 2, we focus on the claim that psychology is badly equipped

to explain important instances of racism; in response, we illustrate how many *other* important instances of racism are best explained by appeal to psychological causes (independently from or in conjunction with social causes). In Section 3, we examine the worry that psychological explanations of racism are detrimental to attempts to deal with racism through social action, either because they depict racism as inevitable, or construe it as a completely individualistic problem (rather than a social or political one). Against this, we show how these arguments rest on an overly simple conception of how psychological explanations work, and a lack of appreciation for some of the most current research. In Section 4, we rebut the claim that psychological explanations of racism exculpate racists. We conclude that the worries Wellman articulates, and we suspect some philosophers also hold, are unfounded. There is no reason to think that psychological explanations of race are inadequate, obstructive, or corrosive. Rather, we hold there is much of interest, and of use, for anyone interested in race, be their primary concerns theoretical, normative, or practical.

1. Wellman's Objections

Wellman's arguments concerning the shortcomings of psychological explanations of racism are made in the context of his criticism of the legal 'intent doctrine', according to which there is "a violation of the Equal Protection clause in the Constitution" only if there is an *intentional* or *purposeful* discriminatory act (2007, 40). In what follows, we will not be concerned with Wellman's discussion of the legal intent doctrine itself, but with the arguments he gives for rejecting psychological explanations of racism. Before reviewing these criticisms, however, we must first briefly describe the type of explanation Wellman finds problematic.

1.1 Explicit and Implicit Biases

For more than 50 years now, social psychologists have attempted to understand the origin of prejudice in all of its forms, including racial prejudice. In doing so, they have developed a

somewhat technical terminology to describe its various aspects. Under the heading ‘prejudice’, social psychologists have included three phenomena that are often, but not always, correlated: stereotyping, prejudice per se, and discrimination. Stereotyping can be thought of as the cognitive component of prejudicial thinking (e.g., the belief that all members of group X are lazy), prejudice per se captures the emotional component (e.g., hatred or fear of group X), and discrimination is the overtly behavioral component (e.g., to hire members of group Y over members of group X on the basis of an irrelevant characteristic like skin color or religious affiliation). Stereotypes are typically thought to be responsible for the biases in information gathering or in memory that are typical of racial cognition (for a good summary, see Jones 2001), while prejudice per se is thought to be responsible for the affective aspect of reactions to outgroup or ingroup members. Both stereotypes and prejudices are thought to have downstream effects on behavior (though their effects might be different).

Recently, social psychologists have turned their attention to the implicit aspects of racial cognition (for extended reviews, see Lane et al. 2007 and Greenwald et al. in press; also see Kelly et al. in press for discussion). Social psychologists have discovered that stereotypes and prejudices can operate implicitly, influencing people’s judgments and behaviors even when people sincerely reject racial stereotypes and prejudices. In these cases, people do not appear to be strategically deceiving themselves or others about what they really think (whatever that might mean). Rather, the egalitarian ideals such people sincerely profess are distinct from, and coexist with, implicit racial biases.² Social psychologists have developed a research methodology to measure these implicit biases:

[T]o measure pure automatic racial bias, unaltered by participants’ social desirability concerns, some researchers place participants in situations where they have less control over their responses or less knowledge about what their responses imply. (Eberhardt 2005, 182)

With a variety of probes and tools based on this strategy (such as the Implicit Association Test), they have repeatedly found that implicit biases about some group often coexist and operate in

tandem with explicit mental attitudes about the same group (that is, both explicit beliefs about and explicit prejudices toward that group). Furthermore, a variety of indirect measures have revealed people can harbor implicit racial biases that are diametrically opposed to their explicit racial attitudes.

More recently, evidence has been mounting that such implicit biases influence many forms of behavior and judgment. For instance, one study showed subjects harboring implicit biases against Blacks were more likely to interpret ambiguous actions made by a Black person negatively than neutrally (Rudman and Killanski 2002), while another documented subtle influences on the way subjects interacted with Black experimenters: When talking to a Black experimenter, subjects with implicit biases towards Blacks smiled less, talked less, and made more speaking errors in comparison to when they interacted with a White experimenter (McConnell and Leibold 2001). Recent work has even shown that implicit biases can influence which prescriptions doctors are likely to issue to Black versus White patients (Green et al. 2007). Moreover, in research on intergroup discrimination (including racial discrimination), the Implicit Association Test was found to be more predictive than self-report.

Social psychologists have also started including the tools and technology of neuroscience in their investigations of the implicit and automatic aspects of racial cognition. One example of this is in recent work on the phenomenon called ‘the same-race advantage’. We have long known (Malpass and Kravitz 1969) that subjects find it harder to recognize and discriminate between members of an outgroup than they do to recognize or discriminate between members of their ingroup; members of a particular outgroup tend to look more similar to each other than members of one’s own group. Previous work on facial recognition that employed neuroscientific technology (Kanwisher 2000) suggested that much facial information is processed in the gyrus fusiform. Bringing that technology to bear on the same-race advantage, Golby and colleagues (2001) showed subjects ten Black and ten White faces, along with pictures of neutral objects (e.g., antique radios). The subjects were asked to remember these stimuli, and their memory was

later tested. This memory test revealed a same-race advantage, consistent with previous studies. Furthermore, it was found that “individually defined areas in the fusiform region that responded preferentially to faces had greater response to same-race versus other-race faces” (Golby et al. 2001, 845).

Although there is much more that can be said about the contemporary psychology of racism, this brief review is sufficient to give a flavor of the kinds of psychological explanations of racism Wellman finds problematic. Psychologists have shown that discrimination can result from unconscious biases so that well-intentioned people could discriminate unknowingly, and even despite their best efforts not to.

1.2 Proper Explanations are Social, not Psychological

Wellman contrasts the types of psychological explanations of racism we have just described with sociological explanations of the same phenomenon, ultimately to the favor of the later:

Rather than locating the sources of discrimination in an individual’s brain, in biases that produce stereotypes, the sociological framework finds them in the history, organization, language, and ways of seeing or not seeing in a racially divided society. In comparison to cognitive neuroscience, it finds discrimination in behavior and routine organizational practices, not attitudes. Instead of attributing discrimination to judgment error or mistaken prejudices, sociologists find the sources of exclusion in the structuring of racial inequality and a sense of group position. (Wellman 2007, 63)

According to Wellman, psychological explanations are individualistic. They explain racist discrimination by appeal to properties of individuals, including their attitudes, mental processes, and perhaps implicit biases about race. By contrast, the explanations Wellman favors account for racist discrimination by referring to properties of societies—particularly, their social organization and how it results from specific historical trajectories.

Wellman’s preference for sociological explanations over psychological ones is understandable, given that he endorses an institutional theory of racism. The phrase ‘institutional theory of racism’ is used to refer to a current in the study of racism that views contemporary

racial discrimination or inequality not so much as the result of individual bigotry or prejudice, but rather as the result of institutions and policies. In general, institutional theories of racism are committed to two claims (Arthur 2007; Berard 2008). First, racism should not be defined in terms of beliefs, attitudes, or behavioral dispositions, but rather in terms of negative or unequal outcomes such as the racially unequal distribution of a good (e.g., Brown et al. 2003, 17). Second, modern racism should not be explained by reference to the actions of prejudiced individuals, but rather by reference to policies or institutions that perpetuate inequality. As an upshot, according to institutional theories, racism can be generated and sustained without racist individuals (and even despite the explicit commitment of individuals to equality); this is, simply put, racism without racists. For our purposes, the important point is that on Wellman's view, racial discrimination does not necessarily depend on specific mental states, such as attitudes, beliefs, emotions, or values (e.g., 2007, 53).

Housing provides Wellman with a good example of how inequalities can be produced even when no one is racist:

Because fewer Blacks can obtain mortgage loans, and when they do obtain them they do so on less favorable terms, the value of the housing they purchase is lower on average than the value of housing purchased by Whites. White flight compounds the problem; the value of Black housing declines as Whites move out, making it more difficult for new Black buyers to obtain loans at reasonable rates of interest. The circle is completed when banks redline black neighborhoods, leading to downward spiral of disinvestment. African Americans, consequently, accumulate less wealth with devastating consequences. (Wellman 2007, 58)

Instances of racism such as housing inequalities would plausibly still exist if people's unconscious biases, prejudices, racial emotions, etc., disappeared. Entirely unprejudiced White Americans would still be concerned with the market value of their homes and would still avoid racially mixed neighborhoods, and wealth inequalities would persist. Thus, instances of racism such as housing and wealth inequalities are not adequately explained in psychological terms.³ Finally, Wellman treats housing inequalities and other similar instances of racism as

paradigmatic, and so infers that racism in general is not adequately explained in individualistic, psychological terms.

1.3 Psychological Explanations Inhibit Social Action

As we have just seen, Wellman's discussion of institutional theories of racism suggests that psychological accounts of racism are *explanatorily inadequate*. The objections we examine in the remainder of Section 1 are of a different kind: Wellman argues that in addition to being inadequate, psychological accounts of racism have *pernicious consequences*. We focus here on the first alleged pernicious consequence: Psychological accounts are likely to obstruct the fight against racism, either by depicting it as inescapable or by construing it in overly individualistic terms.

Concerns about what psychology might uncover about racial cognition are not new. Since Allport's pioneering work, *On the Nature of Prejudice* (1954), psychological accounts of racist prejudice (in the broad sense that includes stereotypes and prejudice per se) have explained racism as the result of the normal working of perceptual and categorization mechanisms. This explanatory tradition thus challenges the intuitive view that prejudiced cognition is the product of motives that are somehow sick or irrational. As social psychologist Susan Fiske puts it:

Allport observed that people universally and spontaneously separate themselves into homogeneous groups, into *us* and *them* categories. Being more comfortable with their own group, people rarely deal with other groups, allowing glib generalizations (...). Yet Allport believed that categorization is necessary; "orderly living depends on it."
(Fiske 2005, 37; original emphasis)

Recent accounts of prejudice retained Allport's idea of the normality of prejudice, but emphasized its unconscious and automatic nature. Allport already anticipated some of these ideas when he wrote (quoted in Fiske 2005, 38; the emphasis is Allport's) that "[t]he human mind *must* think with the aid of categories (...). We *cannot possibly avoid* this process (...) that results *inevitably* in prejudgments." If prejudice results from the normal functioning of psychological

mechanisms shared by all human beings and if these mechanisms operate independently of agents' wills (if they are automatic), then we would seem to have little control over many of the mechanisms that produce racist discrimination. Wellman objects to psychological explanations on exactly these grounds. He holds that from the perspective of psychology, "racism is inescapable" (2007, 51). Wellman assumes that if racism is inescapable, then little could be done to mitigate it, short of adopting radically intrusive and draconian techniques. Unsurprisingly, Wellman holds that such methods would be ethically problematic. As he puts it (2007, 51), "there is no space for intervention or change, except for undefined, Orwellian notions like 'mental correction' or 'careful process re-engineering'."

Wellman concludes from this line of thought that psychological accounts of racism are likely to impede the fight against it. Since (barring some ethically problematic interventions) racism is depicted as being inescapable, people are likely to assume that efforts to reduce racism are futile. Wellman again contrasts psychological with his favored sociological accounts, which he claims will promote action. Since they construe racism as a social fact resulting from particular historical circumstances, Wellman insists that sociological accounts make racism seem less inevitable, and more curable. He holds that because social facts result from people's actions, they can also be modified by people's actions. Wellman puts this contrast eloquently:

The sociological account interrogates and disrupts the normality of discrimination. By treating discrimination as a humanly constructed project rather than an automatic cognitive response to difference, it enables one to see instances of racial inequality, which were once seen as the natural order of things. Because cognitive neuroscience considers encoded bias as fixed, automatic, inevitable, it has no theory of social change. The sociological understanding, however, sees discrimination as socially constructed, variable and changeable. Moreover, because racial inequality is understood to be a human invention, and not a natural or normal feature of social cognition, in the sociological framework, human beings have the ability and responsibility to alter those policies and practices which reproduce the American system of racial advantage and exclusion. (Wellman 2007, 65)

In addition to this worry about inevitability, Wellman offers another reason that psychological explanations could obstruct social action. In focusing on biases harbored by

individuals, Wellman holds that psychological accounts cast racism as an individual, private problem instead of a social or political one. If the picture adopted by psychology is right, what one has to do to eliminate racism is to get rid of individual biases, not adopt social measures. As he puts it (2007, 55; see also Brown et al. 2003, 20), psychological explanation has the “effect of silencing and removing it [racism] from the political agenda.”

1.4 Psychological Explanations Undermine Responsibility

In addition to being incorrect and obstructing the fight against racism, Wellman also argues that psychological explanations have another pernicious consequence: They erode people’s responsibility for their racist actions. As we have seen, according to several prevalent theories in social psychology, some forms of racial discrimination are at least partially driven by automatic processes that are present in normal human minds. One might then wonder whether racists can be held responsible for the behaviors that those automatic processes influence. If not, then it seems that psychological explanations could be used to absolve people of their ‘racial sins’. Wellman is sensitive to this possibility, and advances a final objection to psychological explanations that stems from it. He articulates the objection as follows:

If bias is ultimately a function of biology and neurology, human actors do not control it. Consequently, they cannot be held accountable for discriminatory behavior. The human actor in this account is a medium through which the normal cognitive processes of categorization are played out. They are passive recipients of raw data, which the brain then processes into categories that automatically bias what they see and how they act. ... Just as it invalidates the intent doctrine, it might also provide the grounds for an effective defense against allegations of discrimination. “Yes, my honor, I did discriminate. But I didn’t intend to. My behavior was the result of implicit and cognitive bias, which automatically produced my discrimination.” (Wellman 2007, 50)

2. The Adequacy of Psychological Explanations of Racism

In the remainder of this article, we explain why we are not convinced by the objections laid out by Wellman. We first show that the claim that proper explanations of racism are social rather

than psychological is misguided. Our response is based on a pair of claims, namely that racism is a diverse phenomenon and that different instances of it call for different types of explanation.

2.1 Diversity of Racism

Housing is one of Wellman's paradigmatic examples of a racist discrimination.⁴ In this case, inequalities in wealth distribution result from a complex chain of social causes: It is more difficult for Black Americans than for White Americans to obtain a mortgage; as a result, Black Americans tend to obtain mortgages that are smaller and that have a higher interest rate than the mortgages obtained by White Americans; they are thus unable to buy properties whose value will quickly increase (because they are located in attractive neighborhoods, etc.); ultimately, wealth is increasingly unequally distributed among Black and White Americans (Hoerlyck 2003). In this case, social and economic mechanisms seem to explain the inequality of housing-related wealth quite aptly. There is no obvious need to refer to particular psychological states to explain this phenomenon (but see n. 3). So we agree with Wellman, some cases of racism are better explained by invoking only sociological causes. But does this show that psychological explanations are never appropriate? Surely not! Inequality in housing-related wealth might be an instance of racism, but other instances of racism are quite different, suggesting that they might call for other types of explanation.⁵

For instance, consider the finding that judgments and decisions made under strict time constraints are sensitive to race, especially those made by people harboring implicit racial biases. In a series of studies investigating the 'weapon bias', Payne and his colleagues asked subjects to quickly identify an object as either a gun or some other random, harmless object. Strikingly, they discovered that when they were shown a picture of a Black face before doing this identification exercise, both White and Black Americans alike were more likely to misidentify harmless objects as guns (Payne 2006).⁶ Not only is this weapon bias found in people who explicitly try to avoid discriminatory or biased behavior, but this bias is also highly correlated with the indirect

measures of racial biases (Payne 2005). Similarly, recall that implicit biases have been found to affect which prescriptions doctors give to Black versus White patients (Green et al. 2007).

Phenomena like these involving weapons and medical prescriptions are fairly clear instances of racism, as is the inequality of housing-related wealth discussed above. But these two biases are also importantly different from Wellman's housing market example. First, they do not involve any distribution of wealth. Furthermore, they focus either on features of interpersonal relations or the characteristics of individuals involved in them, rather than the sorts of market inequalities that are more straightforwardly social phenomena.

Our conclusion here is simply that instances of racism are quite diverse. Moreover, many instances, such as those we have called attention to are either predominantly psychological or behavioral rather than social, and, thus, call for a psychological explanation. Indeed, any other explanation of these cases of racism would seem to invite a how-question: Since the phenomena are either psychological or behavioral, one would legitimately wonder *how* the causes mentioned in these non-psychological explanations could bring them about. Appeal to psychological findings, such as the increased likelihood of mistaking members of other races for one another, or the fact that interracial relations might drain one's cognitive resources, can help to explain many such cases of racism. Here, psychological explanations like these do not raise a how-question; rather, they answer it!⁷

2.2 Multi-Disciplinary Explanations of Racism

In addition to those discussed thus far, we further hold that some instances of racism call for explanations that make appeal to different types of causes, including internal psychological causes as well as social and historical causes. We call these 'multi-disciplinary explanations'.

Before we illustrate this claim, it is noteworthy that Wellman's discussion of racist discrimination often appeals to different types of causes. More specifically, Wellman sometimes refers to 'organizationally produced scripts'. For instance, commenting approvingly on Haney-

Lopez's new institutionalism, he writes (2007, 50) that "locating discrimination in organizational behavior rather than individual bias, [Haney-Lopez] suggests that racial beliefs do not emerge out of stereotypes, but rather are organizationally produced scripts that suffuse American society and operate as 'racial institutions'." In this context, scripts are ways to understand and participate in social situations, including interracial interactions. They encode ways of perceiving, feeling, and doing that make these social situations, and the actions and feelings involved, appear normal and natural. These scripts are also taken to result from specific historical contexts and have specific historical functions. In Wellman's example, they are thought to normalize and justify the unequal wealth distribution. One of the goals of social theorists is to deconstruct these scripts—that is, to show that they are historically created and that the situations they apply to and govern are not natural or inevitable. We wish to call attention to the fact that what Wellman calls 'scripts' seem to be complexes of mental states. They involve beliefs about their objects, normative expectations, desires, and goals. If this is right, then Wellman's own account of racial discrimination seems to be, in fact, partly psychological (see also Berard 2008).

Let's now consider an example of what we call a multi-disciplinary explanation. For about sixty years, sociologists and psychologists have studied the effect of interracial contact on prejudice (for discussion, see Kelly et al. ms, section 2). One of the well-studied instances of interracial contact was the desegregation of housing projects (for review, see Pettigrew 1998, 67-68). It was repeatedly found that desegregation resulted in a reduction of Whites' prejudices toward Blacks, including in a stronger support for desegregation measures. It might seem that in this case, a social cause (viz. the end of the spatial separation between racial groups and a decrease in social separation) is sufficient to explain a decrease in racial prejudice. This impression is erroneous, however. Research reveals that a decrease in social separation does not always result in decreased prejudice, and that whether prejudice is decreased depends on a host of psychological factors, including whether Blacks and Whites think of themselves as belonging to a common larger group (for discussion, see Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). So, according to the

researchers working on these issues, varying levels of racism are explained by both social factors (the quantity and nature of interracial interactions) as well as psychological factors (how people conceive of these interactions). This is a clear instance of a multi-disciplinary explanation.

By definition, multi-disciplinary explanations of racism appeal to different types of causes, including both psychological and social causes. Furthermore, the social and psychological causes mentioned in most of these explanations are interactive: The causal influence of social factors on prejudice, discrimination, or racial categorization depends on psychological factors, and vice-versa. For instance, contact decreases racism only if interracial interactions are thought of in a specific way. Thus, for at least some instances of racism, satisfying explanations must refer to both psychological and social causes. Hence, we conclude that Wellman's argument that psychological explanations of racism are explanatorily superfluous is unpersuasive. Rather, psychology will be indispensable to many explanations of racism.

3. Psychological Explanations and Social Action

We now turn our attention to Wellman's second pair of arguments, which concern the effects psychological explanations might have on practical efforts aimed at dealing with the problems of racism. In this section, we demonstrate that there is no reason to think that psychological research will undermine social action taken against racism. We show that psychological explanations do not depict racism as being inevitable or inescapable. In addition, rather than being inherently and perniciously individualistic, those explanations can be used to generate suggestions and help focus social efforts to deal with racism.⁸

3.1 Categorization and Inevitability

It will help clarify the discussion if we begin by drawing some distinctions. First, it is important to separate claims about categorization *tout court* from claims about racial categorization in particular. Our reconstruction of Wellman's arguments that from the perspective

of psychology “racism is inescapable” (2007, 51) showed his concern to be rooted in the view that “the human mind *must* think with the aid of categories” (Allport 1954, quoted in Fiske 2005, 38). We need not take a stand on this claim, but even if Allport turns out to have been right about the psychological inevitability of categorization in general, nothing about the inevitability of a particular type of categorization, including racial categorization, would follow. While we might not be able to avoid applying *some* set of categories or other, there still may be a large amount of leeway in which classificatory scheme we rely on or employ. We can go even further; assume, for the sake of argument, that humans do indeed inevitably categorize other people into in-groups and out-groups, or as Allport put it, into *us* and *them*. Even this claim does not imply that racial categorization in particular is inescapable. For it does not follow that those who fall under the category *us* must be those who belong to the same race. Rather, it remains entirely possible that the boundaries of an ingroup might be conceived along family lines (‘us’ applies to one’s kin), along ethnic lines (‘us’ applies to members of one’s own ethnic group, see Gil-White 2001) along coalitional lines (‘us’ applies to those in one’s own cooperative coalition, see Kurzban et al. 2001) or by appeal to membership in any number of other groups: members of the same religion or even of the same sports team or fan base. These are importantly different possibilities, and psychological research suggests that (and how) different group boundaries can be made more or less salient. Thus, we grant that it is *prima facie* plausible that categorization in general is an inevitable feature of human thought, but whether or not the use of *racial* categories in human thought is unavoidable, we submit, is an empirical question, which is best addressed with the help of psychological research.

Our second point has to do with the difference between racial categorization and what we might call racial evaluation. Previously, we remarked on the differences social psychologists draw between three different negative components of racism, namely a cognitive component often called ‘stereotyping’, an affective component often called ‘prejudice’ (*per se*), and a behavioral component often called ‘discrimination’. The characterization of all three of these

aspects of racial evaluation does not include processes of categorization, but presupposes that categorization has already taken place. It is plausible that in order for a racist to bring the negative evaluations she holds about some group to bear on some individual, she would already had to have categorized that individual as belonging to the group in question.⁹ At the very least, we wish to point out that claims about the inevitability of racial categorization, in and of themselves, do not entail anything about the inevitability of these three other processes, stereotyping, prejudice, and discriminatory behavior. The relationships between categorization and evaluation, and the manner and extent to which they can be dissociated from each other and from racial categorization itself, are, we submit, largely empirical matters that can be best addressed by psychological research (for instance, see Amodio and Devine 2006). This is not a merely academic or otherwise irrelevant point: One may consistently argue for an ideal according to which, on the one hand, the negative baggage often associated with racial categorization (false negative beliefs, negative attitudes, discriminatory behavioral tendencies) is eliminated, but, on the other hand, racial categorization and racial categories themselves remain in circulation and are used to maintain racial identities, racial communities, etc.¹⁰

3.2 Psychological Research and the Inevitability of Racial Thought

Does the relevant psychological research suggest that either racial categorization or prejudice is, indeed, inevitable or unalterable? In short, the answer to this question is: no. When they are properly presented, psychological explanations do not depict racism as inescapable, and so need not obstruct the fight against racism for this reason.

One set of considerations in support of this comes from theories about the nature of the cognitive mechanisms that underlie racial categorization. Many of the explanations of racial cognition offered by evolutionarily oriented cognitive psychologists make appeal to both the workings of specific cognitive mechanisms and the social environment in which they develop and function (for review, see Machery and Faucher 2005). They hypothesize that modern humans'

propensity to classify racially is a by-product of a cognitive mechanism that initially evolved to serve some purpose *other* than racial categorization, but which is tracking racial membership in many current social environments. Particular theories differ on the exact structure and proper function of the cognitive mechanism in question, but all suggest that making targeted changes to the social environment in which the mechanism operates may reduce the prominence of racial categories in thought. Although space prevents discussing these theories in detail, none of the strategies for influencing the prominence of racial categories suggested by this literature, e.g., cutting back on the use of overly racial terms in one's vocabulary or introducing mentoring programs that pair protégés with mentors of different races, strikes us as Orwellian or obviously morally problematic.

Another type of consideration comes more directly from experimental research on racial evaluation. First, research based on self-report has shown that explicit racial bias has declined significantly over the course of the last few decades (Shuman et al. 1997), which is enough to establish that at least some aspects of racial evaluation are not inescapable. Second, and more to the point of Wellman's concerns, nothing about the research on implicit cognition (see section 1) indicates that implicit racial bias is an inevitable or unalterable feature of the human psyche. While they are widespread, implicit racial biases are not present in the entire population, and hence are not an inevitable part of human nature, and, for those who do have them, the strength of implicit racial biases varies substantially from individual to individual as well (Nosek et al. 2007). Third, there is a large body of research on the *malleability* of implicit biases, which investigates the methods by and conditions under which implicit biases can in fact be altered; it demonstrates they can be influenced in a number ways, and their expression in judgment and behavior can be effectively mitigated. This work sheds important light on the effectiveness of particular methods under various conditions (e.g., Blair 2002; Richeson and Trawalter 2005; Bartholow et al. 2006; Govorun and Payne 2006; Lebrecht et al. 2009). Far from suggesting anything that is deviously Orwellian or obviously ethically problematic, implicit biases are amenable to such innocuous

methods as having participants focus on counter stereotypic imagery (Blair et al. 2001) or images of admired Black celebrities (Dasgupta and Greenwald 2001), or having them interact with a Black person who is in a superior or prestigious role (Lowery et al. 2001; Richeson and Ambady 2003).

The duration of the changes brought about by these varies from method to method, and certainly more research will shed light on which are most effective in bringing about the most sustained forms of alteration, but the upshot for our dialectic purposes is simple: The state of the art psychological research on racial cognition in no way suggests that racial cognition is rigid or inflexible in any way that would indicate that racism itself is inescapable. As we see it, this undermines the most plausible reason to think that promulgation of current psychological explanations of racism would undermine social action directed at ending it.¹¹

3.3 Individualism and Social Action

Another reason that Wellman offers in support of the claim that psychology is counterproductive to social action is that psychological explanation is inherently individualistic. Wellman holds that explanations pitched at a more social level, such as sociological explanations, have the effect of promoting social action, while psychological explanations somehow depict racism as an individual problem, and thus removes it from the political agenda.

We take this claim to draw whatever plausibility it has from the erroneous belief that psychological explanations take no account of people's social context. However, many, if not most, psychological accounts of the cognitive mechanisms underlying thought and behavior associated with race not only describe how these mechanisms process information internally, but they also describe the sorts of cues in the social environment these mechanisms are sensitive to, and the types of characteristic influences those mechanisms have on thought, evaluation, and overt social behavior. Rather than removing the problem from the social domain, many good psychological explanations of the cognitive underpinnings of racism make reference to elements

of the environment, including features of the social and institutional dynamics in which the relevant cognitive mechanisms function. Far from being purely individualistic, such explanations show how racist thought and evaluation operate in context, and what aspects of that context are relevant to their functioning.

For this reason, rather than being obstructive to efforts to deal with racism that are pitched at a social level, the current research on racial cognition can inform, direct, and even help improve such efforts. As pointed out above, many of the psychological findings straightforwardly lead to suggestions about how to alter racial cognition in various ways. For instance, the research on the malleability of implicit biases can provide guidance on how to best mitigate implicit racial biases and their effects by changing people's social environments. If, as Dasgupta and Greenwald's (2001) work suggests, exposure to images of admired Black celebrities can effectively decrease implicit bias, then a straightforward suggestion for social efforts would be to increase the volume and prominence of images of admired Black individuals throughout the culture.¹² We see nothing preventing the suggestions one might draw from psychology from being incorporated into social action or policy, either in the form of targeted changes to institutional or social structures, or in promulgating those individually employable strategies that turn out to be most effective in mitigating the most problematic aspects of racial cognition (for instance particular methods of self-control or individuation; see Kelly et al. ms for discussion and evaluation of various methods, in light of current evidence). Which suggestion is appropriate, of course, depends on what goal one is seeking to achieve, and, in some cases, which theory turns out to be correct. Naturally, psychological research may not shed light on how to cure *every* instance of racism (for instance those exemplified by Wellman's housing example), but, as we have argued above, racism has a variety of manifestations, and psychological work can shed important light on how to address many of those.

4. Psychological Explanations and Responsibility

We now focus on Wellman's third objection against psychological explanations of racism: In addition to being incorrect and obstructing the fight against racism, psychological explanations are corrosive to our practices of holding racists responsible for their actions.¹³ We now argue that this claim, too, is mistaken, and that psychological explanations do not absolve racists of their racial sins.

4.1 The Parity of Social and Psychological Explanations

Why does Wellman think that psychological explanations really entail that racists are not responsible for their racist actions? Beyond allusions to issues like control, automaticity, and passivity, he offers no detailed argument in support of this claim. Our strategy will be to spell out a few of the most plausible versions of the argument Wellman may have in mind, and articulate where we think those arguments fall short. We argue that social and psychological explanations are similar in a number of relevant ways, and so on a par with respect to the issue of responsibility: If psychological explanations of racism exculpate racism, so do social explanations.

We take it as uncontroversial that psychological explanations account for the instances of racism to which they apply in causal terms. This could be the source of Wellman's worries about psychology and responsibility: He might hold that when an agent's behavior x is *causally* explained, this agent cannot be responsible for doing x . Such a view raises an immediate problem, however. Social explanations of racism—the type of explanations favored by Wellman—are also causal explanations: Specific social structures are hypothesized to cause the occurrence of inequality in the distribution of wealth, power, etc.¹⁴ Thus, by parity of reasoning Wellman should also hold that social explanations entail that agents are not responsible for the racist inequalities that result from the hypothesized social structures.

But, perhaps, Wellman does not hold that psychological explanations exculpate racists because they are causal. Perhaps psychological explanations are assumed to exculpate racists

because people have *no direct control* over the psychological causes of their racist behaviors and thoughts (emotions, biases, etc.). However, this reply does not help since people have no direct control over the social causes of their racist behaviors and thoughts either.

Perhaps Wellman holds that one is not responsible for an action x if one could have avoided doing x , and that racist actions explained by appeal to psychological causes are *unavoidable*, while those racist actions explained by appeal to social causes can be avoided. If this is the case, then he would justifiably hold that psychological explanations, but not social explanations of racism, entail that racists are not responsible for their racist actions. This argument is unconvincing, however. As we showed in Section 3, psychological explanations do not make racist actions unavoidable.

Wellman might hold that psychological explanations entail that racists are not responsible for their racist actions because they are *psychological*, and social explanations do not because they are *social*. This, we submit, is plainly circular; such a response simply begs the question about the relevant differences between the two explanations that we are raising.

Finally, in a few places of his chapter, Wellman suggests that neuropsychological explanations of racism entail that racists are not responsible for their racist actions because they are *reductionist*—they explain behavior by reference to events in racists’ brains—and they do not view people as agents (2007, 51): “The very thin and mechanical social psychology upon which neuroscience is built (...) produces as many problems as it solves. There are no human actors in the theory who identify, interpret, make sense of their world, and then act on it.” The suggestion that the distinction between reductionist and non-reductionist explanations of behavior matters for responsibility is rooted in our folk understanding of responsibility (Nahmias et al. 2007), but we doubt it is philosophically defensible. The crucial point is that *only some* reductionist explanations of morally wrong actions exculpate people—viz. those that entail that people’s actions were not the results of conscious and rational decisions (we discuss more specific exculpatory conditions in the next section). But the reductionist explanations of racist behaviors

provided by the neuropsychology of racism do not uniformly entail this; in fact, many such explanations entail the exact opposite, since they refer to the brain localizations of mental states such as desires, emotions, stereotypes, and biases. In assuming that racists are motivated by mental states like these, they manifestly *do* treat people as agents.

We see no other non-arbitrary justification of the claim that there is something about explanations appealing to psychological factors in contrast to social factors that undermines responsibility. Since no detailed argument is provided, we conclude that with respect to issues of responsibility and blame, psychological and social explanations are in the same boat; if psychological explanations entail that racists are not responsible, so do social explanations.

4.2 Are Racists Exculpated?

Of course, the conclusion that psychological and social explanations have similar implications for racists' responsibility does not tell us whether psychological explanations do indeed exculpate racists. We now argue that this is not the case for many, perhaps most, instances of racism to which psychological explanations apply.

A concrete example with help start off the discussion: imagine a person who crosses the street in order to avoid walking past a group of young Black males. What might explain this? Psychologists working on race-related emotions have shown that different racial groups elicit different emotions (jealousy, fear, anger, etc.) and that these emotions fit with people's stereotypical beliefs about these different racial groups (for instance, racial groups that elicit jealousy are often viewed as being unfairly successful). In particular, White Americans are often afraid of young Black males and hold stereotypes about them that justify their fear—Black males are often represented as threatening or dangerous (e.g., Cottrell and Neuberg 2005). This type of theory at least partially explains the action under consideration: People sometimes cross the street to avoid walking past young Black males because Black males elicit a conscious or an unconscious fear and because they view those Black males as being dangerous. Does the

availability of this psychological explanation exculpate people from the racist action under consideration? We think not. We argue, furthermore, that if people are responsible for some racist actions that are explainable by appeal to psychological factors, then, *pace* Wellman, the applicability of psychological theories does not entail a blanket exculpation of racists.

It should be noted that the necessary and sufficient conditions for being responsible for an action x remain hotly debated within philosophy (e.g., Fisher and Ravizza 1999). Fortunately, we do not have to resolve this debate to discuss the implications of psychological research for the responsibility of racists. In what follows, we focus on exculpatory conditions—viz. conditions that, if satisfied, would exculpate people for their actions. The exculpatory conditions we list below are commonsensical, and some are enshrined in the law (e.g., Goldstein et al. 2003; Morse 2004). Although we do not attempt to be exhaustive, our list of conditions contains the most important ones among those relevant to our purposes. In addition, most philosophical theories of responsibility concur that these conditions are indeed exculpatory.¹⁵

The commonsensical, widely agreed-upon exculpatory conditions we take to be relevant are as follows:

- *Awareness condition*: An agent is exculpated for having done x if she was not aware of doing x (except when she is responsible for having been unaware of doing x). People are not responsible for what they are doing during sleepwalking because they are not aware of doing what they are doing. Note that agents might be responsible for some actions they are not aware of doing when they should be so aware and when they are responsible for not being aware.

- *Know-why condition*: An agent is exculpated for having done x if she did not know why she was acting the way she was acting (except when she is responsible for having been ignorant).

- *Control condition*: An agent is exculpated for having done x if she was internally constrained to do x (except when she is responsible for having been internally constrained).

This condition explains why we sometimes do not hold addicts responsible for their drug

consumption: Although they are aware of their actions and although they know why they are acting the way they act, they are internally constrained to act the way they act.

- *Rationality condition*: An agent is exculpated for having done x if her rationality was substantially impaired when she did x (except when she is responsible for the impairment of her rationality). This condition is illustrated by the M'Nagthen standard and subsequent standards in the law.

As we have seen above, crossing a street to avoid walking past a group of young Black men can be explained psychologically. We now show that this action does not fall under any of the four exculpatory conditions and that, as a consequence, one would be responsible for such a racist action. Since people are aware that they are crossing the street, their action does not satisfy the awareness condition. Furthermore, people know why they are crossing the street: They view the group of young men as vaguely threatening. Thus, their action does not satisfy the know-why condition, either. Although (let us assume) they do not know why they have the emotions and stereotypes they have (also assuming they have no insight into their own psychology), they know why they act the way they act. Furthermore, the rationality of the individuals acting in the way considered here is not obviously impaired: The emotions and stereotypes that cause their action do not result from any malfunctioning component of their minds. So, their actions do not satisfy the rationality condition. Finally, it is easy to imagine such people endorsing their own actions: They could justify themselves by citing the threatening nature of the group of young Black males. As a result, their action does not satisfy the control condition, either.

There is much more to be said about racists' responsibility in light of psychological explanations of racism, of course. Theories of racism that appeal to implicit biases have revealed that *some* behaviors may indeed satisfy one or other of the exculpatory conditions. For instance, some racist behaviors may satisfy the awareness condition. Strikingly, agents might not be aware of some behaviors that result from implicit biases, such the fact that they typically sit further from members of other races than from members of their own race. Other cases may satisfy the *know-*

why condition. In such cases, while agents might be conscious *that* they are doing some action, they might not know *why*, i.e., they might not know that the behavior is driven by implicit biases. For example, when employers' discrimination results from implicit biases, they might erroneously and sincerely believe that they are hiring more Whites than Blacks because the White applicants were more qualified than the Black applicants. Finally, as noted above, implicit biases sometimes run against people's explicitly held views. As a result, when their actions are caused by implicit biases, people might act, or be constrained to act, against the principles they hold, and so may satisfy the control condition. How to deal with cases like these is not immediately clear, since one might want to modify the exculpatory conditions to preserve the responsibility of those agents who act in a racist manner because of some implicit biases. But, upon further examination, it could turn out that the agents involved may very well be justifiably excused for their behavior.¹⁶

We conclude that Wellman's worries concerning the interplay between racist behaviors, psychological explanations, and responsibility ascriptions are largely misguided. We have considered the most charitable reconstructions of the arguments he may endorse, and have revealed them to be unpersuasive. We have shown instead that with respect to many features that could be relevant to the issue of responsibility, social and psychological explanations are on a par. We have also shown that there are no general conclusions to be drawn about the implications of psychological explanations of racism for responsibility ascriptions. Wellman suggests that psychology exculpates racism, but the fact is that numerous psychological explanations appear to leave racists responsible for their actions. Finally, as opposed to a blanket exculpation of racism, we have pointed to particular instances of racist behaviors that may be excusable, and for which people should not be held fully responsible. Certainly much more careful philosophical work need to be done on this topic, but that work will need to take account of the details of current psychological research, rather than, as Wellman's discussion seems to recommend, ignoring it.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that worries about psychological explanations of racism are largely unfounded. We suspect such worries are fairly common, if not always precisely formulated. To best address such concerns, we have focused on three claims advanced and explicitly argued for by the sociologist David Wellman. Wellman argues that psychological explanations of racism are explanatorily inadequate, that in depicting racism as inevitable or overly individualistic they undermine social efforts to deal with the problem, and that they are corrosive to our practices of holding racists responsible for their actions. We have responded that a better understanding of the nature of psychological explanation, and a better appreciation of the details of research on racial cognition, reveals that Wellman is incorrect about each of these conclusions. Racism is a multifaceted phenomenon, and in explaining and dealing with some instances of racism, appeal to psychological factors will be indispensable. None of the currently viable psychological explanations, however, casts racial categorization or evaluation as inevitable, nor do they necessarily run afoul of currently accepted accounts of responsibility. Properly understood, research on the psychology of racism can help us come to grips on how to best understand it, how to most reasonably hold each other accountable for its various manifestations, and how to best fight it.

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NOTES

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² In what follows, we will talk about implicit biases to refer to both implicit stereotypes and implicit prejudice.

³ It is not entirely clear whether cases of racism like the housing example involve no interesting or important psychological component and whether sociological explanations of them can make no mention of psychological factors at all. Though we do not have the space to take up the issue in detail, we discuss the possibility of multi-disciplinary explanations in Section 2.2.

⁴ Philosophers disagree about the conditions under which an action, a belief, an emotion, or a social situation count as racist (e.g., Garcia 1996; Blum 2002), and some (Blum 2002) have introduced the notion of racial ills to refer to the race-related actions, beliefs, situations (etc.) that are morally wrong, but that do not necessarily count as racist according to their preferred analysis of the concept of racism. In what follows, we use 'racist' inclusively, and so apply it to any race-related action, situation, etc., that is morally wrong.

⁵ According to Lawrence Blum (personal communication), Wellman might reply that social forms of racism are more significant than interpersonal and psychological ones. The institutional theory of racism seems indeed to rest on such an idea (Berard 2008, 735). But, to our knowledge, no serious evaluation of the significance of these two types of racism has been conducted, and it is thus unclear whether this reply can be defended.

⁶ Furthermore, when White subjects have to decide whether to shoot at the person holding the object, they shoot faster at Blacks holding guns, they make more false positive mistakes when Blacks are holding harmless objects, they are slower to shoot Whites with guns, and they make more false negative mistakes with that group (Correll et al. 2002).

⁷ Wellman could reply that as with the case involving the housing market, the situations we examined should also be explained in social and historical terms. The weapon bias might result from stereotypes about the Blacks' violent nature that have been developing since at least the end of the nineteenth century. In response, we acknowledge that there are historical and social causes of the biases we discussed above, but with many philosophers of science, we hold that not every cause of a phenomenon P need figure into an appropriate explanation of the phenomenon (e.g., Lewis 1973; Van Fraassen 1980), and we propose (but do not argue here for the sake of space) that the social and historical causes of the instances of racism we have described above (as opposed to Wellman's housing market example) typically fail to explain those instances.

⁸ While we again confine our discussion to Wellman and the explicit claims and arguments he makes, passages in the work of other philosophers suggest that they hold views similar to Wellman's concerning the unwelcome possibility

that psychological explanations may depict racism and prejudice as both unavoidable and inalterable, on the one hand, and individualistic rather than social, on the other. For instance, Blum (forthcoming) states, “we must make sure that prejudice can be reduced, that it is not an inevitable and ineradicable part of human nature. Several distinct theories claim or strongly suggest that it is.” Elsewhere he contrasts psychological explanations with social ones, and claims that “*psychological* theories locate the causes of prejudice in features of individual personality” (original emphasis).

⁹ This point is potentially complicated by the fact that derogatory concepts such as ‘Boche’ involve both a descriptive and evaluative component. As far as we know, little empirical work on such concepts has been done.

¹⁰ See Lucius Outlaw (1996) for an exploration and defense of such a position.

¹¹ A reviewer suggests that upon hearing psychological explanations of racism, most ordinary folk may conclude that it is inevitable or inescapable. We do not know if this is correct, but think such potential misunderstandings would be best dealt with not by suppressing, dismissing, or distorting the psychological research, but by making sure that in public forums it is presented properly and in full, perhaps with emphasis on the work on malleability. For example, see Blow (2009).

¹² One cannot help but wonder what far-reaching effects the election of Barack Obama, and the subsequent ubiquity of his image, will have on implicit biases in the United States; initial findings indicate it may have already had an influence on test scores (Marx et al. forthcoming).

¹³ One could also examine whether racists are responsible for their racist thoughts, emotions, and other mental states, as distinct from their racist behaviors (Kelly and Roedder 2008). For the sake of space, we focus on racist behavior.

¹⁴ For instance, poverty among Blacks is three times larger than poverty among Whites (Arthur 2007, ch. 5). Moreover, while it has declined since 1940, this decline has virtually stopped since the 1970s. Some economists (for instance, Wilson 1996) argue that to understand poverty and the lack of improvements in Blacks’ condition, one has to pay attention to changes in the structure of labor markets, particularly to the fact that a large number of unskilled blue collar jobs disappeared or move abroad and were replaced either by jobs requiring more education (or other skills) or by low paying jobs. Indeed, in recent years, the percentage of manufacturing jobs in the USA went from 25 % in 1970 to a mere 5% in 2005. Blacks were disproportionately affected by this reduction.

¹⁵ However, we would not be surprised to find that each one individually is rejected by some philosophical theory of responsibility or another.

¹⁶ Following a suggestion made in Kelly and Roedder (2008), behaviors that satisfy one or more of the relevant exculpatory conditions for the types of reasons cited in the text could still be regarded as morally wrong, while the agents who engage in them might not be held responsible or considered blameworthy, or not held *as* responsible or

considered as blameworthy, as agents who engage in similar behavior, but fail to satisfy any relevant exculpatory conditions.

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