Automatic Ethics: What We Take for Granted Matters

Keith Leavitt, Ph.D., and Major Walter J. Sowden, U.S. Army

I N NEARLY EVERY decision we make or action we take throughout the course of the day, we rely upon a vast set of assumptions that we take for granted. When visiting a new grocery store, we can assume the milk will be in the dairy case. We also expect a certain kind of container, know what it should cost, and whom we should pay. In stepping into a crosswalk, we make a tremendous assumption that the driver of that car is law-abiding, awake, and functionally sane. As Soldiers, we make these assumptions during training and contingency operations. For example, while on a land navigation course, we make various assumptions as to what types of terrain features we'll come across based on what we see (i.e., low ground means a stream or creek) and make the proper plans to negotiate that terrain. In addition, in the operational environment of combat, we assume that our fellow Soldiers will perform their mission, adhere to the Soldier's Creed, and embody Army Values. Our behavior relies completely on the truth of these assumptions, yet most of us have never thoroughly considered or formalized them, and we most certainly do not think about them during the moments when we act. Very often, the decisions we must make quickly have the most gravity, and they draw heavily on our moral foundations and assumptions.

Implicit Attitudes and Assumptions

Recent behavioral research suggests that many of our automatic assumptions might be inaccurate and possibly even harmful. Social psychologists have recently discovered the importance of "implicit attitudes." These simple associations operate outside of conscious awareness, are difficult to suppress, and drive a lot of our behavior when we do not have the time to really think about a situation. Scientists have developed valid and reliable rapid response tasks to tap these automatic processes and have produced interesting and sometimes disturbing findings.

For example, an implicit association between "male" and "science" was a better predictor of undergraduate females' choice of majors than their grade point average, entrance exam scores, or their own stated interests.[1] Put simply, intelligent, confident, and skilled female students who implicitly believed that the sciences are related to being "male" did not consider their own abilities when making a career choice.

More disturbingly, in a task known as the "shooter game" in which images of people appear on the screen holding either a weapon or a benign object (a banana, book, etc.), participants quickly press a key to "shoot" those holding weapons, and a "don't shoot" key for those holding

Keith Leavitt, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at West Point and a research member of Project Implicit. He currently works with the Center for the Army Profession and Ethic. He holds a Ph.D. in organizational behavior (management) from the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington and masters degrees in management and social psychology.

Major Walter J. Sowden, U.S. Army, is the deputy G4 for the 807th Medical Deployment Support Command Operational Command Post in Seagoville, TX. He holds a B.A. in sociology from South Dakota State University and an M.A. in organizational and social psychology from Columbia University.

_____

PHOTO: An Iraqi surrenders just north of the An Nu'maniyah Bridge along Highway 27 in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. (DOD, SGT Paul L. Anstine, II, USMC.)

benign objects. Results showed that participants were fastest and most accurate when deciding to shoot African Americans holding weapons, or to not shoot whites holding benign objects. In other words, "African Americans" and "weapons" are automatically more compatible in our minds than are "whites" and "weapons." Multiple studies (using different populations) showed a similar pattern; regardless of whether participants were white, black, college students, or police officers, it was easier to recognize (and shoot) a dangerous African American than a dangerous Caucasian.[2]

Our implicit beliefs cut much deeper than attitudes about race and gender. In a recent study, researchers looked at lay persons, business students, and working managers' implicit beliefs about the ethical nature of business. First, they found that managers held a stronger association between the concepts of "business" and "ethics" than did business students, and that business students in turn held stronger associations than other lay persons did. It makes sense that the longer people spend in an occupation, the more they would believe in it. More disturbing was the finding that those who believed business was highly ethical were the most likely, in a business exercise, to "pad" an insurance claim for their company or negotiate using illegal insider information. In short, an assumption (that business is ethical) kept them from using personal discretion. They erroneously assumed that if business is inherently ethical, then anything they do in the name of business must be ethical too.[3]

One doesn't need to stretch one's imagination too far to see the implications of all this for ethical decision making and behavior within the Army. During a recent interview, a team leader serving in Iraq recounted that one night when he and his team were on guard duty, an Iraqi national carrying a white flag attempted to get his attention. Before anyone on the ground could get to the Iraqi, he began climbing the forward operating base security wall and effectively breached the perimeter. The rules of engagement set forth competing directives: the sergeant should shoot the man for breaching the perimeter and yet not shoot him because of the white flag. In that moment, with little time to act, we can imagine how automatic assumptions influenced the sergeant's judgment—his beliefs about the Iraqi people, his role as a Soldier, and his beliefs about human nature.[4] In short, the sergeant's automatic assumptions shaped his reaction to the intruder. More infamous examples, such as prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and the murder of Iraqi citizens at Iskandaria, might also be understood in this way.[5]

In Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, we recognize that the men and women who make up the Army join the organization with their character preshaped by their backgrounds, beliefs, education, and experience. During a Soldier's initial entry training, we, as an organization, attempt to compensate for the multitude of differences in various preset characters and level the playing field by putting each Soldier through an extensive and thorough socialization process. However, we cannot expect the process to fully override associations built from a lifetime's worth of experience and exposure to varied sources of information.

Because implicit assumptions frequently operate outside of our own awareness, this creates something of a paradox. On the one hand, the information contained in these assumptions is not our "fault," because we form them unconsciously through the experiences life brings us. (One study of implicit race associations shows that these beliefs strongly correlate to our parents' expressed attitudes about minorities rather than to our own).[6]

On the other hand, we must own our decisions and our behavior in critical situations, particularly when there are moral and ethical implications. Although limited empirical research exists to show how implicit assumptions can change, most potential interventions focus on reducing our reliance on assumptions by increasing awareness. We must make an effort to consider a situation before we act.

> *In short, the sergeant's automatic assumptions shaped his reaction to the intruder.*

A Soldier provides security during the arrests of Iraqis, Baghdad, Iraq, 13 August 2007.

We may be able to decrease the detrimental impact of our implicit assumptions by—

● Becoming aware of the content of our implicit assumptions.

● Actively monitoring our "knee jerk" reactions to situations and practicing overriding them with good judgment.

● Building complexity into our thinking by elaborating and questioning our assumptions.

Increasing Awareness

Developing awareness of our implicit assumptions is part of developing self-awareness. We define self-awareness as being aware of oneself, including one's traits, feelings, and behaviors (FM 6-22, Chapter 8).[7] As an organization, we put a premium on self-awareness, under the Army's old leadership and training doctrine ("Be, Know, Do"). FM 6-22 espouses 11 principles of leadership, the first of which is "know yourself and seek self-improvement." Because automatic assumptions frequently operate outside conscious awareness, it's often the case that we can't know our own minds.

Fortunately, behavioral researchers have begun to develop a wide array of tools to capture "hidden assumptions."

To date, one of the most reliable is the implicit association test which is available online (www.projectimplicit.com). The site provides anonymous scores and feedback to help you understand your own automatic assumptions. It's called "Project Implicit" and is a nonprofit research organization located at Harvard, the University of Washington, and the University of Virginia.

Monitoring Our Reactions

Although complex and powerful situations unfold quickly, daily life presents us with plenty of opportunities to preview and correct assumptions that might emerge in important situations. For example, if a bad customer service interaction leads to an automatic negative thought about the person's race, this moment should serve as a warning, as well as an opportunity to address this automatic assumption's appearance in our thinking. Once we recognize our own automatic assumptions and the behavioral

tendencies that come from them, we can work to interject further consideration and "thought stopping" analysis, instead of taking immediate action. It is obvious how this could play in an interaction with an Afghan or Iraqi if we implicitly believe that Middle Easterners are lying; we may miss out on valuable information or damage constructive relationships.

Challenging Our Assumptions and Our Beliefs

Just as the managers and business school students who believed "business" was inherently "ethical" failed to use any personal discretion in their business behaviors, we run the risk of believing that our mission brings automatic morality to our behavior within it. Modern battlefields and theaters are inherently complex, and bring with them the ability to do both great good and grave irreparable harm. The values and history of the U.S. Army frequently lead to doing good, but if we begin to believe that our efforts are *inherently* ethical, we run the risk of not recognizing serious moral hazards. A recent study found just this: when a task discretely reaffirmed participants' moral identity (i.e., shored up a belief that they themselves are moral people), they demonstrated *less* motivation to behave well.[8] In short, taking for granted that "mission" and "moral" are always closely related can lead us to do the wrong thing. Talking about these issues within your units and forcing yourself to recognize and question the assumptions you take for granted can trigger personal and unit-level growth. *MR*

NOTES

1. F.L. Smyth, B.A. Nosek, A.G. Greenwald, and M.R. Banaji (2009), "Implicit gender stereotype outperforms scholastic aptitudes in predicting a science major for women," working paper.

2. A.G. Greenwald, M.A. Oakes, and H.G. Hoffman, "Targets of discrimination: Effects of race on responses to weapon holders," *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology* 39 (2003): 399-405.

3. J. Correll, B. Park, C.M. Judd, B. Wittenbrink, M.S. Sadler, and T. Keesee, "The thin blue line: Police officers and racial bias in the decision to shoot," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92 (2007): 1006-23.

4. S.J. Reynolds, K.N. Leavitt, and K. Decelles (in press), "Automatic ethics: The effects of implicit assumptions and contextual cues on moral behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology.*

5. The sergeant involved in this incident wisely trained his gun on this individual but resisted the impulse to fire. When reinforcement arrived, it turned out that the man was both a local police officer and the nephew of a local Sheik friendly to coalition forces. This case study can be found on the ACPME AKO website at <https://acpme.army.mil>.

6. The Michael Hensley case study can be found on the ACPME AKO website.

7. FM 6-22, *Army Leadership* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 4-12.

8. S. Sachdeva, R. Iliev, and D.L. Medin, "Sinning saints and saintly sinners: The paradox of moral self-regulation," *Psychological Science* 20 (2009): 523-28.