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Rinku Sen: The Racist Mind

George Zimmerman (r.) speaks with his defense attorney Don West in the courtroom as they await jury deliberations on July 13, 2013. Photo: Pool/Getty Images

by [Rinku Sen](#)

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The verdict in George Zimmerman's trial caused in me the kind of existential crisis that my optimistic nature is usually able to fend off. In these weeks I have come to understand just how much light exists between the basic assumptions of the racial justice movement and those of most white Americans. A [Pew Research Center survey](http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/22/big-racial-divide-over-zimmerman-verdict/) [http://www.people-press.org/2013/07/22/big-racial-divide-over-zimmerman-verdict/] conducted in the week after the verdict revealed a huge gap between black and white attitudes. Just 30 percent of white respondents said they were dissatisfied with the verdict, compared to 86 percent of blacks. The key strategic question for a racial justice movement is whether to focus on growing that 30 percent, or simply to out organize the rest. To figure out an answer, we need to delve into the complicated relationship between explicit racism, unconscious bias, policymaking and culture.

Our legal frameworks are based on punishing explicit racism. Yet the not-explicit kind, what is known among social psychologists as "implicit bias," also undergirds the punishing policies that make young black men so vulnerable to deadly forms of discrimination. That reality creates a challenge, because it's much easier to condemn obvious racism than the kind that expresses itself in, say, Juror B37's statement that Zimmerman could credibly assume Trayvon Martin was "trying to do something bad in the neighborhood." Implicit bias is the reason why.

In the best-selling book "[Thinking, Fast and Slow](http://us.macmillan.com/thinkingfastandslow/DanielKahneman) [http://us.macmillan.com/thinkingfastandslow/DanielKahneman], psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman describes the brain as having two parts, which he calls Systems 1 and 2. System 1 is lightning fast, intuitive and overconfident. It makes many, many judgements, often based on false assumptions. System 1 selectively pulls facts and images to justify those judgements, totally unaware that it is doing so. System 2, however, is slow, methodical, and much less confident, and it only kicks under real pressure.

System 1 is willing to give George Zimmerman's snap judgements about Trayvon the benefit of the doubt. To make your System 2 kick in and ask, for example, "Do I really need to clutch my bag/call the police/pull out my gun because a black man is walking toward me?" requires a decision, a desire to push System 1 aside. The good news of the Pew poll is it suggests that at least 30 percent of the nation's white people have moved beyond their System 1s and engaged their System 2s. Several hundred of them are represented in the Tumblr [We Are Not Trayvon](http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/07/we_are_not_trayvon_martin_tumblr_explores_white_privilege.html) [http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/07/we_are_not_trayvon_martin_tumblr_explores_white_privilege.html].

What happens in System 1 with regard to race is called implicit bias, which Maya Wiley, president of the Center for Social Inclusion, did a great job of [explaining on "Up with Steve Kornacki."](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=bU59oo8SFU8) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=bU59oo8SFU8] Implicit bias is the way that social psychologists refer to the phenomenon by which we are unaware of our prejudices. Our judgments about people don't qualify as prejudices

because our brains are happy enough to have a coherent story about “those people.” They’re happy to linger in System 1. Social psychologists at Harvard University, University of Virginia and University of Washington created the [implicit bias test online \[https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/featuredtask.html\]](https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/featuredtask.html) to enable people to see their biases at work in a series of rapid-fire judgments driven by images of white and black people.

The combination of implicit bias and power gives explicit racists a lot of cover, through rules and arrangements that don’t need to be explicitly racist to get massive support. The entire Zimmerman trial was influenced by just these sorts of actions—from the initial botching of the crime scene, to the disturbing admissions of [Juror B37 in her CNN interview \[http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/07/the_craziest_moments_from_zimmerman_juror_b37s_cnn_interview.html\]](http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/07/the_craziest_moments_from_zimmerman_juror_b37s_cnn_interview.html), to the adoption of Florida’s so-called “stand your ground” law in the first place. This combination—conscious racists who know not to use the n-word, unconscious racists who can’t recognize bias without the n-word, and policymakers who can easily deny racist intention—affects every issue. This is why it is so hard, for instance, to establish that Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s voter suppression policies were designed to target African Americans and Latinos, or that drug sentencing laws need a major overhaul.

Our inadequate civil rights laws make no provision for unconscious bias. The Civil Rights Act blocks practices and policies that have a racist impact, even if intention can’t be proven. But in truth, it is nearly impossible to win a civil rights case in which racist intention isn’t fairly obvious. [Saru Jayaraman \[http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/staff/jayaraman.shtml\]](http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/staff/jayaraman.shtml), a researcher and organizer who deals with employment discrimination in the restaurant industry, told me once that she can always get a lawyer to file wage theft lawsuits, but finds it much more difficult when the issue involves segregating workers of color in back of the house jobs.

So if people are unaware of their biases, how *can* we hold them accountable? How can we grow that 30 percent of white people dissatisfied with the status quo? It seems to me that we have to get their System 2s to kick in.

In an essay about “Fruitvale Station,” [Washington Post film critic Ann Hornaday \[http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2013/07/25/2b3aaeae-f3ab-11e2-9434-60440856fadb_story.html\]](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2013/07/25/2b3aaeae-f3ab-11e2-9434-60440856fadb_story.html) suggests that white Americans’ reluctance to claim their privilege doesn’t make it any less real:

As mortified as some white people may be at the suggestion that we’ve enjoyed career advancement at someone else’s expense, we need to acknowledge that one can benefit from privilege even if it isn’t explicitly claimed. Indeed, perhaps the ultimate marker of privilege is not having to be conscious of it.

That’s System 2 thinking.

At the [Applied Research Center \[http://arc.org\]](http://arc.org), which publishes Colorlines, we try to achieve this by focusing on *impact* rather than *intention*, because most people aren’t conscious enough of their bias for it to qualify as intentional. We talk about racism this way because it lowers the heat level and makes it possible to have an actual conversation, sometimes even to really solve a problem. Lowering the heat level is about getting past white defensiveness, and it does enable people to engage constructively.

I worry sometimes that this framework lets conscious racists off the hook. Still, if it disrupts the coherence of biased stories, if it causes people to wonder whether their good intentions actually translate into fairness, if it gets some folks to stop a minute so that their System 2s can kick in, then it seems like a keeper. This concept of impact rather than intention is the next thing we need to establish in both politics and culture, in both school boards and Hollywood studios.

At last year’s Facing Race conference, I [gave a talk \[http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/11/rinku_sen_we_are_the_majority_and_we_demand_justice.html\]](http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/11/rinku_sen_we_are_the_majority_and_we_demand_justice.html) in which I said I was after changing the course of human evolution itself. If the human brain has evolved to enable other good

things—cooperation, innovation, analysis—then I don't see why it can't evolve past its biases, too. The Zimmerman verdict showed me just how grandiose I was being in that moment, and yet, I am reluctant to give up my vision. It may take millions of years to get there, but we can do our part by addressing the way racism really works, be it in pop culture or the halls of Congress, for as long as we are on this Earth.

Read this online at

http://colorlines.com/archives/2013/07/rinku_sen_thinking_through_racism.html

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