MedicalXpress

Research reveals pervasive implicit hierarchies for race, religion, and age

July 31 2014

As much as social equality is advocated in the United States, a new study suggests that besides evaluating their own race and religion most favorably, people share implicit hierarchies for racial, religious, and age groups that may be different from their conscious, explicit attitudes and values.

The study findings appear in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

"People from relatively low-status groups can readily report that their group does not have the most power. At the same time, most groups, even if they have less social power, favor their own group above all others," explains psychological scientist Jordan R. Axt of the University of Virginia, lead author of the study. "We wanted to investigate how these dual influences—the knowledge that one's group may not have the most power, but nevertheless favoring that group the most—would reveal themselves on measures of both explicit and implicit attitudes."

Axt and colleagues analyzed data from hundreds of thousands of American participants who completed online Brief Implicit Association Tests (BIAT) on race, religion, and age.

In the first task, participants viewed a male or female face of a particular racial group as well as positive words such as "love," "pleasant," "great," and "wonderful," and negative words such as "hate," "unpleasant," "awful," and "terrible." For each set, participants categorized the positive

and negative words with faces belonging to each racial group.

The idea behind the BIAT is that people are quicker to categorize things with the same response when they are associated more closely in memory, even if they consciously reject that association. If a person has positive associations with a particular racial group, for example, it should take less time to categorize faces from that group together with positive words. A person with negative associations, on the other hand, would need more time to categorize faces from that group together with positive words. Thus, the BIAT can uncover biases people may not be conscious of and do not endorse.

Axt and colleagues found that participants were most likely to prefer members of their own race. Additionally, members of almost every racial group exhibited an implicit racial hierarchy of positive evaluations: White, then Asian, then Black, then Hispanic.

Likewise, people favored their own religion. After their own group, participants' implicit hierarchies usually placed Christianity next, followed by Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism (there were two versions of the test, with either Hinduism or Buddhism as an option), and Islam.

Unlike race and religion, however, people did not show a preference for members of their own age group. Still, every age group demonstrated an implicit age-based hierarchy with children at the top, followed by young adults, middle-aged adults, and, finally, older adults.

Importantly, participants' implicit associations differed from evaluations they made when asked to report what they consciously thought of various racial, religious, and age groups.

The researchers offer an explanation for the results:

"Our explicit, conscious attitudes may be derived more from personal beliefs about others. At the same time, implicit attitudes may arise both from our own identities as well as from widely spread cultural beliefs or values," says Axt. "While we may disagree with such cultural beliefs, these results illustrate how they can nevertheless shape our minds."

According to Axt and colleagues, the findings contribute to the debate over whether people prefer their own groups, or if those on a lower social rung actually esteem high-status groups as a justification for the way things are:

"Like many scientific debates, our results suggest that the answer is 'both.'"

More information: *Psychological Science*, DOI: 10.1177/0956797614543801

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Research reveals pervasive implicit hierarchies for race, religion, and age (2014, July 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-reveals-pervasive-implicit-hierarchies-religion.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.