

Discrimination against blacks linked to dehumanization, study finds

February 7 2008

Crude historical depictions of African Americans as ape-like may have disappeared from mainstream U.S. culture, but research presented in a new paper by psychologists at Stanford, Pennsylvania State University and the University of California-Berkeley reveals that many Americans subconsciously associate blacks with apes.

In addition, the findings show that society is more likely to condone violence against black criminal suspects as a result of its broader inability to accept African Americans as fully human, according to the researchers.

Co-author Jennifer Eberhardt, a Stanford associate professor of psychology who is black, said she was shocked by the results, particularly since they involved subjects born after Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. "This was actually some of the most depressing work I have done," she said. "This shook me up. You have suspicions when you do the work—intuitions—you have a hunch. But it was hard to prepare for how strong [the black-ape association] was—how we were able to pick it up every time."

The paper, "Not Yet Human: Implicit Knowledge, Historical Dehumanization and Contemporary Consequences," is the result of a series of six previously unpublished studies conducted by Eberhardt, Pennsylvania State University psychologist Phillip Atiba Goff (the lead author and a former student of Eberhardt's) and Matthew C. Jackson and Melissa J. Williams, graduate students at Penn State and Berkeley,

respectively. The paper is scheduled to appear Feb. 7 in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, which is published by the American Psychological Association.

The research took place over six years at Stanford and Penn State under Eberhardt's supervision. It involved mostly white male undergraduates. In a series of studies that subliminally flashed black or white male faces on a screen for a fraction of a second to "prime" the students, researchers found subjects could identify blurry ape drawings much faster after they were primed with black faces than with white faces. The researchers consistently discovered a black-ape association even if the young adults said they knew nothing about its historical connotations. The connection was made only with African American faces; the paper's third study failed to find an ape association with other non-white groups, such as Asians. Despite such race-specific findings, the researchers stressed that dehumanization and animal imagery have been used for centuries to justify violence against many oppressed groups.

"Despite widespread opposition to racism, bias remains with us," Eberhardt said. "African Americans are still dehumanized; we're still associated with apes in this country. That association can lead people to endorse the beating of black suspects by police officers, and I think it has lots of other consequences that we have yet to uncover."

Historical background

Scientific racism in the United States was graphically promoted in a mid-19th-century book by Josiah C. Nott and George Robins Gliddon titled *Types of Mankind*, which used misleading illustrations to suggest that "Negroes" ranked between "Greeks" and chimpanzees. "When we have a history like that in this country, I don't know how much of that goes away completely, especially to the extent that we are still dealing with severe racial inequality, which fuels and maintains those

associations in ways that people are unaware," Eberhardt said.

Although such grotesque characterizations of African Americans have largely disappeared from mainstream U.S. society, Eberhardt noted that science education could be partly responsible for reinforcing the view that blacks are less evolved than whites. An iconic 1970 illustration, "March of Progress," published in the Time-Life book *Early Man*, depicts evolution beginning with a chimpanzee and ending with a white man. "It's a legacy of our past that the endpoint of evolution is a white man," Eberhardt said. "I don't think it's intentional, but when people learn about human evolution, they walk away with a notion that people of African descent are closer to apes than people of European descent. When people think of a civilized person, a white man comes to mind."

Consequences of socially endorsed violence

In the paper's fifth study, the researchers subliminally primed 115 white male undergraduates with words associated with either apes (such as "monkey," "chimp," "gorilla") or big cats (such as "lion," "tiger," "panther"). The latter was used as a control because both images are associated with violence and Africa, Eberhardt said. The subjects then watched a two-minute video clip, similar to the television program *COPS*, depicting several police officers violently beating a man of undetermined race. A mugshot of either a white or a black man was shown at the beginning of the clip to indicate who was being beaten, with a description conveying that, although described by his family as "a loving husband and father," the suspect had a serious criminal record and may have been high on drugs at the time of his arrest.

The students were then asked to rate how justified the beating was. Participants who believed the suspect was white were no more likely to condone the beating when they were primed with either ape or big cat words, Eberhardt said. But those who thought the suspect was black were

more likely to justify the beating if they had been primed with ape words than with big cat words. "Taken together, this suggests that implicit knowledge of a Black-ape association led to marked differences in participants' judgments of Black criminal suspects," the researchers write.

According to the paper's authors, this link has devastating consequences for African Americans because it "alters visual perception and attention, and it increases endorsement of violence against black suspects." For example, the paper's sixth study showed that in hundreds of news stories from 1979 to 1999 in the Philadelphia Inquirer, African Americans convicted of capital crimes were about four times more likely than whites convicted of capital crimes to be described with ape-relevant language, such as "barbaric," "beast," "brute," "savage" and "wild." "Those who are implicitly portrayed as more ape-like in these articles are more likely to be executed by the state than those who are not," the researchers write.

The way forward

Despite the paper's findings, Eberhardt said she is optimistic about the future. "This work isn't arguing that there hasn't been any progress made or that we are living in the same society that existed in the 19th century," she said. "We have made a lot of progress on race issues, but we should recognize that racial bias isn't dead. We still need to be aware of that and aware of all the different ways [racism] can affect us, despite our intentions and motivations to be egalitarian. We still have work to do."

For Eberhardt, two stories of race exist in America. "One is about the disappearance of bias—that it's no longer with us," she said. "But the other is about the transformation of bias. It's not the egregious bias anymore, but it's modern bias, subtle bias." With both of these stories, she said, there is an understanding that society has moved beyond the

historic battles centered around race. "We want to argue, with this work, that there is one old race battle that we're still fighting," she said. "That is the battle for blacks to be recognized as fully human."

Source: Stanford University

Citation: Discrimination against blacks linked to dehumanization, study finds (2008, February 7)
retrieved 30 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-02-discrimination-blacks-linked-dehumanization.html>

<p>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.</p>
--