

Fear of messing up may cause whites to avoid blacks

April 1 2008

Democratic consultant Donna Brazile brought home America's reluctance to talk openly about race in a New York Times article that preceded the Barack Obama speech that now has the whole nation buzzing. In essence, she said in her quote, any serious discussion about race has the effect of clearing a room.

Brazile's remark and the presidential hopeful's groundbreaking speech about a subject that politicians generally tiptoe around in public hint at the complexities of race relations in America today. As we approach the second decade of the 21st century, research shows that many Americans feel anxious during interracial interactions whether or not race is even mentioned.

Now a provocative new study from Northwestern University suggests that whites who are particularly worried about appearing racist seem to suffer from anxiety that instinctively may cause them to avoid interaction with blacks in the first place.

"The Threat of Appearing Prejudiced and Race-based Attentional Biases," by Jennifer A. Richeson, associate professor of psychology and African-American studies and faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at Northwestern, and Sophie Trawalter, post-doctoral fellow, IPR, recently appeared in the journal *Psychological Science*.

Study participants indicated that they worry about inadvertently getting in trouble for somehow seeming biased. As a result, the study suggests,

they behaved in a way that research shows people respond when faced with stimuli that cause them to feel threatened or anxious: they instinctively look at what is making them feel nervous and then ignore it.

In this case, study participants, 15 white college students, indicated that they were motivated to respond in non-prejudiced ways toward blacks primarily for appearance's sake because of concern about social disapproval -- rather than because of their internal values.

They then took a standard psychological test that measures attention patterns related to anxiety provoking or threatening stimuli. The white students initially focused on images of black faces with neutral expressions, relative to white faces with similar expressions, and then quickly disengaged and paid greater attention to the white faces.

Participants who were selected for the study first had to complete a Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale. Those who were selected had scores that indicated that they were externally, rather than internally, motivated to not appear racially biased. On a one-to-nine scale, they rated their agreement with statements that included: "Because of today's politically correct standards, I try to appear non-prejudiced toward black people."

They then participated in a computer test that featured in all the trials a black face and a white face, with either similar neutral expressions or similar happy expressions. Theoretically, they shouldn't have paid attention to either of the two faces, one black and one white, appearing on either side of the computer screen, because they were told to keep their attention fixated on a cross in the middle of the screen. But, as expected, they inevitably turned their attention to the faces. Because everything happened so fast, however, they weren't aware that they had paid different amounts of attention to black faces, compared to the white faces.

When a dot appeared on the computer screen where one of the faces had previously appeared, they had to quickly say whether it appeared on the right or the left side of the fixation point. Finding the dot the fastest was an indication that attention had been directed to the face that had just disappeared from the position where the dot was displayed.

For the shorter trials (30 milliseconds) with the neutral faces, study participants tended to find the dot quickly when it was located behind the black face, which tended to be the initial focus of attention.

During the slightly longer trials (450 milliseconds), however, the dot-probe test indicated that they tended to quickly turn their attention away from the neutral black face to the white face with the same expression.

“Think of it as initially turning your attention to something that poses a threat or causes anxiety and then ignoring it because you don’t want to deal with it,” said Richeson. “These low-level psychological processes happen dynamically, and our tests indicate that people probably avoided the neutral black faces because they provoke anxiety, not necessarily because of racial animus.”

Patterns of attentional biases were eliminated when the faces were smiling. Well-established clinical and cognitive psychology research shows that people process expressions of emotion quickly, and presumably black male faces with smiling expressions did not seem threatening or provoke anxiety.

The article cites a similar study that tested how children with chronic pain responded to pain-relevant words. In short trials, they tended to look at the pain-relevant words, and in the longer trials they avoided them.

Richeson’s study draws from a body of such clinical psychology research on threat and attention. Basically, that research shows that people who

have anxiety about various stimuli in everyday life tend to ignore what is stressing them out, unlike people with clinical anxiety, who tend to fixate on what triggers their anxiety.

Richeson stresses in every class she teaches on stereotyping and prejudice that a solution to a problem often presents another problem. Ironically, her study suggests, standards to create a diverse yet harmonious society may unwittingly be encouraging anxious responses toward blacks.

“Norms and standards to achieve diversity are a great solution to undermining racial bias,” Richeson said. “Our research suggests that we now also need to start thinking about creating opportunities to undermine anxieties about living up to those standards, to let people know they are going to be okay if they engage in interracial relationships.”

Source: Northwestern University

Citation: Fear of messing up may cause whites to avoid blacks (2008, April 1) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-04-messing-whites-blacks.html>

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