

Everyone's a little bit racist, but it may not be your fault, study suggests

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Everyone's a little bit racist, posits the song from the musical Avenue Q. But it may not be your fault, according to research in the latest edition of the *British Journal of Social Psychology*. In looking for the culprit as to why people tend to display tinges of racism, sexism or ageism, even towards members of their own group, a research team, led by the Georgia Institute of Technology, found that our culture may be partially to blame.

While previous psychological studies have shown that racism, sexism and ageism tend to be universal, a new study led by Paul Verhaeghen, professor in Georgia Tech's School of Psychology, found that works in the American culture, namely literature, movies, TV, radio and the Internet, may contribute to the problem by exhibiting the same [stereotypes](#) that society works so hard to snuff out.

"There's one idea that people tend to associate black people with [violence](#), women with weakness, or older people with [forgetfulness](#) — because they are prejudiced. But there's another possibility that what's in your head is not you, it's the culture around you," said Verhaeghen. "And so what you have is stuff you picked up from reading, television, radio and the Internet. And that's the question we wanted to answer: are you indeed a racist, or are you just an American?"

So they gave their participants a questionnaire designed to rate the amount of prejudice (both negative and positive) they exhibited.

They also timed their subject's response times to different types of word pairs. The first types were word pairs typically associated with stereotypes, like black-lazy, female-weak or old-lonely. They contrasted this with pairs of words that contain the same first word, but are not stereotypical pairings, like black-goofy, female-uptight, or old-playful. A third type were words that are highly related, but do not reflect stereotypes, like night-cool, or summer-sunny. Social psychologists believe that these very fast response times that people tend to exhibit for stereotypical pairs are a reflection of an unconscious, gut-level type of prejudice.

Then they examined a collection of works known as the Bound Encoding of the Aggregate Language Environment (BEAGLE), which contains a sample of books, newspaper and magazine articles, about 10 million words in all, thought by psychologists to be a good representation of works that are in the [American culture](#). They looked at how often the words they tested their subjects on were paired together in the literature.

Finally, they correlated the results of their tests with what they found in BEAGLE.

In looking at their results from the tests and what appeared in BEAGLE, they found that participants responded faster to the pairs that were more often found together in the literature, whether they were stereotypical or not. So words like black tended to have a much stronger correlation with words that are associated with negative and positive stereotypes like lazy or musical, than with words like goofy that aren't associated with stereotypes. But pairs that were often found in the [literature](#) together, like day and light or summer and sunny also inspired a faster response time for participants than words that weren't found together in BEAGLE. Other pairs that had strong correlations were white with greedy and successful; male with loud and strong; female with weak and warm; old with lonely and wise; and young with healthy and reckless.

This leads scientists to believe that the very fast 'gut' reaction measured through response times doesn't have much to do with the prejudice of the subjects, but a lot more with how often people have seen or heard these words paired over a lifetime. They also point out that response times were not correlated with the questionnaires about prejudice.

"One of the things these findings suggest is that for those of us who, like me, very often feel guilty about these gut reactions you have and you're not supposed to have is those gut reactions are normal and they have very little to do with you. They have more to do with the culture around you," said Verhaeghen. "What is more important is your behavior, rather than your gut reaction."

"The second thing is that there's a reason for political correctness. At least, as studies suggest, it might be a good idea to not put stereotypes out there too clearly, because if you do, people will internalize them."

Provided by Georgia Institute of Technology

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