

Racial stereotyping increases after being exposed to alcohol-related images, psychologist says

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Accusations of racism accompanying the death of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent actions of Florida police are prevalent in the national media this week. Many are questioning the psychological motivations of everyone involved. Recent research by University of Missouri Professor of Psychological Sciences Bruce D. Bartholow has shown that consuming alcohol can lead to increased expression of racial bias. A new study by Bartholow and his colleague, Elena Stepanova of Florida Gulf Coast University, shows that simply being exposed to alcohol-related images can have similar effects, even when no alcohol is consumed.

"Simply seeing images of [alcohol](#), but not drinking it, influences behaviors like [racial bias](#) on a subconscious level," Bartholow said.

"Walking by a bar or seeing an ad for beer could be enough to affect someone's mindset. You don't have to be aware of the effects for it to affect you."

The recent study found that participants who had initially viewed a series of magazine ads for alcoholic beverages made more errors indicative of racial bias in a subsequent task than did others who had initially seen ads for non-alcoholic beverages, such as water or coffee.

Test participants were shown a series of ads for either alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages. They then completed a computerized task in which pictures of white and black men's faces were shown for a split second,

followed immediately by either a picture of a handgun or a tool. Numerous previous studies using this same task have shown that people often mistakenly identify tools as guns following presentation of a black face, a response pattern attributed to the effects of racial stereotypes. The fast pace of the experiment kept participants from thinking about their responses, which allowed the subconscious mind to control reactions.

In the real world, snap decisions in which one object is mistaken for another can be deadly.

"As for the Trayvon Martin case, it very much reminds me of the Amadou Diallo case in 1999, when an unarmed black individual was shot to death by New York City police officers," Stepanova said. "Diallo was shot because officers claimed that they thought he pulled a gun, while in fact he reached for his wallet. The wallet was misconstrued as a gun by police officers."

"Associations between blacks and guns, violence and criminal behavior played a role in Mr. Martin's case," Stepanova said. "Mr. Martin was essentially a victim of [racial stereotypes](#) that so many in our society hold, and that cost him his life."

The results of Bartholow and Stepanova's study don't contend that every test participant was a racist, however.

"Even if people do their best to be open-minded, we are all aware of stereotypes," Bartholow said. "Participants' responses could have been due to associations they are aware of but don't personally endorse. Also the results could be influenced by people's ability to control their behaviors. A member of the KKK could hide his prejudice if he had good control of his responses."

Analysis of the results showed people's automatic, subconscious behaviors were most affected after seeing an alcohol ad, whereas earlier studies found actually drinking alcohol most influenced conscious, controlled reactions. Bartholow suggested the mental associations people have with the effects of drinking alcohol may have been what caused their increased expression of racial bias after seeing alcohol ads. Upon seeing alcohol, they subconsciously felt they could relax their inhibitions and allow their behaviors to be more influenced by stereotypes.

More information: The study was published online in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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