

Human prejudice in humans has evolved

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Contrary to what most people believe, the tendency to be prejudiced is a form of common sense, hard-wired into the human brain through evolution as an adaptive response to protect our prehistoric ancestors from danger.

So suggests a new study published by ASU researchers in the May issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, which contends that, because human survival was based on group living, "outsiders" were viewed as "and often were " very real threats.

"By nature, people are group-living animals" a strategy that enhances individual survival and leads to what we might call a "tribal psychology," says Steven Neuberg, ASU professor of social psychology, who wrote the study with doctoral student Catherine Cottrell. "It was adaptive for our ancestors to be attuned to those outside the group who posed threats such as to physical security, health or economic resources, and to respond to these different kinds of threats in ways tailored to have a good chance of reducing them."

Unfortunately, says Neuberg, because evolved psychological tendencies are imperfectly attuned to the existence of dangers, people might react negatively to groups and their members even when they pose no realistic threat.

Neuberg and Cottrell had 235 European-American students at ASU think about nine different groups: activist feminists, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, European-Americans, fundamentalist Christians, gay men, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans and nonfundamentalist

Christians. The researchers then had the participants rate these groups on the threats they pose to American society (e.g., to physical safety, values, health, etc.) and report the emotions they felt toward these groups (e.g., fear, anger, disgust, pity, etc.).

Consistent with the researchers' hypotheses, findings revealed that distinct prejudices exist toward different groups of people. Some groups elicited prejudices characterized largely by fear, others by disgust, others by anger, and so on. Moreover, the different "flavors" of prejudice were associated with different patterns of perceived threat.

Follow-up work further shows that these different prejudices motivate inclinations toward different kinds of discrimination, in ways apparently aimed at reducing the perceived threat.

"Groups seen as posing threats to physical safety elicit fear and self-protective actions," Cottrell says. "Groups seen as choosing to take more than they give elicit anger and inclinations toward aggression, and groups seen as posing health threats elicit disgust and the desire to avoid close physical contact."

"One important practical implication of this research is that we may need to create different interventions to reduce inappropriate prejudices against different groups," Neuberg says.

For example, if one is trying to decrease prejudices among new college students during freshman orientation, different strategies might be used for bringing different groups together.

Neuberg and Cottrell are adamant to point out that just because prejudices are a fundamental and natural part of what makes us human doesn't mean that learning can't take place and that responses can be dampened.

“People sometimes assume that, because we say prejudice has evolved roots, we are saying that specific prejudices can’t be changed. That’s simply not the case,” Neuberg says. “What we think and feel – and how we behave – is typically the result of complex interactions between biological tendencies and learning experiences. Evolution may have prepared our minds to be prejudiced, but our environment influences the specific targets of those prejudices.”

Source: Arizona State University

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