Extremists more willing to share their opinions, study finds

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People with relatively extreme opinions may be more willing to publicly share their views than those with more moderate views, according to a new study.

The key is that the extremists have to believe that more people share their views than actually do, the research found.

The results may offer one possible explanation for our fractured political climate in the United States, where extreme liberal and conservative opinions often seem to dominate.

"When people with extreme views have this false sense that they are in the majority, they are more willing to express themselves," said Kimberly Rios Morrison, co-author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

How do people with extreme views believe they are in the majority? This can happen in groups that tend to lean moderately in one direction on an issue. Those that take the extreme version of their group's viewpoint may believe that they actually represent the true views of their group, Morrison said.

One example is views about alcohol use among college students.

In a series of studies, Morrison and her co-author found that college students who were extremely pro-alcohol were more likely to express

their opinions than others, even though most students surveyed were moderate in their views about alcohol use.

"Students who were stridently pro-alcohol tended to think that their opinion was much more popular than it actually was," she said. "They seemed to buy into the stereotype that college students are very comfortable with alcohol use."

Morrison conducted the study with Dale Miller of Stanford University. Their research appeared in a recent issue of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.

The studies were done at Stanford University, which had a policy of prohibiting alcohol usage in common areas of all freshman dorms. In the first study, 37 students were asked to rate their own views about this policy on a scale from 1 (very strongly opposed) to 9 (very strongly in favor).

The average student's views were near the mid-point of the scale -- but most rated the typical Stanford student as more pro-alcohol than themselves.

"There's this stereotype that college students are very pro-alcohol, and even most college students believe it," Morrison said. "Most students think of themselves as less pro-alcohol than average."

In the next two studies, students again rated themselves on similar scales that revealed how pro-alcohol they were. They were then asked how willing they would be to discuss their views on alcohol use with other Stanford students.

In general, students who were the most pro-alcohol were the most likely to say they wanted to express their views, compared to those with

moderate or anti-alcohol views.

However, in one study the researchers added a twist: they gave participants fake data which indicated that other Stanford students held relatively conservative, anti-alcohol views.

When extremely pro-alcohol students viewed this data, they were less likely to say they were willing to discuss alcohol usage with their fellow students.

"It is only when they have this sense that they are in the majority that extremely pro-alcohol students are more willing to express their views on the issue," Morrison said.

However, students who had more extreme anti-alcohol views were not more likely to want to express their views, even when they saw the data that suggested a majority of their fellow students agreed with them.

"Their views that they are in the minority may be so deeply entrenched that it is difficult to change just based on our one experiment," she said. "In addition, they don't have the experience expressing their opinions on the subject like the pro-alcohol extremists do, so they may not feel as comfortable."

This finding shows that not all extremists are more willing to share their opinions - only those who hold more extreme versions of the group's actual views.

These results have implications for how Americans view the political opinions of their communities and their political parties, Morrison said.

Take as an example a community that tends to be moderate politically, but leans slightly liberal.

People with more extreme liberal views in the community may be more likely than others to attend publicly visible protests and display bumper stickers espousing their liberal views, because they think the community supports them.

"Everyone else sees these extreme opinions being expressed on a regular basis and they may eventually come to believe their community is more liberal than it actually is," Morrison said. "The same process could occur in moderately conservative communities.

"You have a cycle that feeds on itself: the more you hear these extremists expressing their opinions, the more you are going to believe that those extreme beliefs are normal for your community."

A similar process may occur in groups such as political parties. Moderately conservative people who belong to the Republican Party, for example, may believe that people with extremely conservative views represent their party, because those are the opinions they hear most often. However, that may not be true.

Morrison said when she and her colleagues were thinking about doing this study, they had in mind the phrase about the "silent majority" in the United States, which was popularized by President Richard Nixon and his vice-president, Spiro Agnew. They referred to the silent majority as the people who supported the war in Vietnam, but who were overshadowed by the "vocal minority" against the war.

While there may not be one monolithic silent majority in the United States, Morrison said this study suggests that the minority may indeed be more vocal in some cases.

Source: The Ohio State University (news : web)