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Racism may be erasable: study

BYLINE: By Merritt McKinney

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Contrary to previous research, California scientists report that the human mind may not be naturally wired to view other people through the lens of ethnicity.

Instead, the brain may have started using ethnicity to classify others not because of the physical differences in skin color, but because ethnic differences were one of several ways to identify people who belonged to competing groups.

"It is not inevitable that differences in physical appearance will cause people to mentally group people into **races**," one of the study's authors, Dr. John Tooby at the University of California at Santa Barbara, told Reuters Health.

Ethnicity seems to become a compelling way to group people, Tooby told Reuters Health, when racial aspects of appearance become associated with a social alliance. In other words, he said, these features become "politicized" because they represent membership in another group of people.

Previous research has found that the brain is hard-wired to view new people in terms of sex, age and **race**, Tooby and colleagues Drs. Robert Kurzban and Leda **Cosmides** note in a report in the December 18th issue of the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. This may be true for age and sex, but the researchers challenge the idea that the brain is naturally wired to view others in terms of ethnicity.

Tooby's team hypothesized that the brain was wired by evolution to detect any visual sign of difference in a new person to tell whether the individual was a part of the same group, and thus whether a new person was an enemy or an ally. Since early humans rarely encountered people of different **races**, the researchers thought it unlikely that ethnicity would be wired into the brain. Instead, **race** is one of many visual clues that the brain uses to tell whether another person is from the same group.

To test their idea, the researchers performed a set of experiments that tested what factors people use to classify others into groups, or alliances. The results of the study question the idea that racial categorization is an automatic function of the brain.

Although people in the experiments were not completely color-blind, they used ethnicity to categorize people much less often when they were presented with other characteristics for matching people into the appropriate group. The groups, or alliances, that participants viewed were composed equally of blacks and whites.

What surprised Tooby and his colleagues was how quickly people could change the way they grouped people, which took minutes rather than years, he said.

"We had no idea it would be so fast," he said.

"I think most people think **race** consciousness is a durable state of mind, rather than something that a new social context can rapidly deflate," according to the California researcher.

Most people, Tooby said, probably think that consciousness of ethnicity is rooted in physical appearance. But according to the present study, "the politicization of groups" causes the mind to group people based on appearance, Tooby noted. He pointed out that these signs of appearance are just as likely to be clothing, manner or accent as ethnicity.

"While it is important not to put too much stock in any single study in thinking about such a complex issue as **race**, this makes me personally far more optimistic about how rapidly racism might be diminished than I had been previously," Tooby concluded.

The next step, according to co-author Kurzban, is to confirm the results of the study.

"The findings were surprising enough that we're interested in trying to find other methods that arrive at the same conclusion," he told Reuters Health in an interview.

The results of the study come from psychological experiments, but there is some evidence that the same process works in the real world, according to Tooby. He pointed out a recent article in The New York Times that described how ethnic tensions in New York City seemed to diminish after the September 11th attacks.

"Of course," Tooby pointed out, "there are happier ways of redrawing social boundaries than the emergence of external enemies."

And changes in racial attitudes are not always positive. At the same time that relationships between some racial groups improved, at least temporarily, the Times article reported that many Americans began to be suspicious of people of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent.

SOURCE: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 2001;98:15387-15392.

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