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Categorization by **race** not inevitable

BYLINE: By DAMARIS CHRISTENSEN, UPI Science News

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Contrary to previous assumptions, people may not automatically categorize other people by **race** and researchers said Monday that may suggest racism is not as intractable as many believe.

In this new view, racism exists because people tend to associate differences in skin color with differences between groups, and thus use **race** as a surrogate for identifying coalitions and alliances, said Robert Kurzban, who was at the University of California, Santa Barbara when he conducted the research. He now is at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Researchers previously have suggested when people encounter a new individual they automatically assess the person's sex, **race** and age, qualities that might be useful to help a hunter-gatherer predict a person's later actions.

Kurzban and his colleagues at UCSB argued historically very few individuals would have had the chance to encounter people of other **races** on a regular basis and thus people were unlikely to evolve to identify **race** solely for its own sake.

To test this idea, Kurzban and his colleagues asked a number of students at UCSB to form impressions of individuals engaged in a "conversation" -- in reality a series of still pictures of a person paired with a sentence. The participants were told each pictured individual -- there were eight characters total -- belonged to one of two basketball teams that had been in a fight during the previous season.

After viewing the pictures and sentences, put together as though each character had said three sentences in a heated discussion, the subjects were asked to recall which character said each particular sentence.

This kind of recall is difficult and typically fraught with error, mistakes the researchers then capitalized on. If the students categorized the characters into different groups on the basis of verbal cues, they should be more likely to incorrectly attribute a statement by one character to another on the same team, rather than to a character on the opposite side of the debate, Kurzban said.

If the categorization was primarily by **race,** students might be more likely to incorrectly attribute sentences to characters who had the same **race** but were on different teams.

For most experiments, each of the two teams was composed of pictures of two black men and two white men wearing basketball jerseys. In a trial with no other identifying information, students were more likely to attribute a statement made by a white man to another white man, and a black man to another black man, than they were to misidentify statements to different characters on the same team. In a second experiment, in which the computer colorized the basketball jerseys so that one team wore yellow shirts and the other gray shirts, the students were more likely to misidentify statements made by a team member to other men on the same team, regardless of **race.**

Students were much more likely to identify teams, in the second experiment than in the first. The effect of **race** was much less pronounced. In addition, the effect of the different colored shirts in the second experiment was stronger than the effect of **race** in the first.

In another set of experiments involving white women rather than black men, sex was an equally important identifying factor regardless of whether the two teams had the same or different colored shirts.

These results will be published in an upcoming issue of the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and will be available online in advance of print at pnas.org.

"If these data hold up over the long term, these findings could be very important," said Jim Sidanius, a visiting scholar with the Russell Sage Foundation in New York and a professor at UCLA. "**Race** is not an immutable mental category but has become a surrogate for other categorizations intended to find out who is in and who is out of your group."

While conflicts between different groups will undoubtedly still remain, Sidonius said, this work implies such intergroup conflicts need not always fall along racial lines.

"If the same processes govern categorization outside the laboratory," Kurzban said, "then the prospects for reducing or even eliminating the widespread tendency to categorize persons by **race** may be very good indeed."

His findings suggest getting people from different racial backgrounds together and cooperating together might be an effective way of reducing racism, he said.

"Although our experiments were carried out in the laboratory, it appears that the predictions were borne out in the aftermath of Sept. 11," added Leda **Cosmides,** a colleague of Kurzban's at UCSB. In these experiments, categorizing by **race** diminished when **race** did not predict the relevant conflict, she said.

Similarly, in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, there were reports of less prejudice against African-Americans in New York City, and less distrust of white police officers. "Us" and "them" no longer were being framed as black versus white, but as Americans versus terrorists.

Likewise, **Cosmides** pointed out this research showed visual markers could quickly be used to identify between groups.

"This happened -- with tragic consequences -- as soon as it was suspected that Middle Eastern terrorists were responsible for the WTC attacks," she said, pointing out hate crimes against people who wore turbans reminiscent of headgear worn in the Middle East. Content: 01022000 05007000 07004000 07005000 07006000 07010000 13003000 13009000 14003000 14010000 14014000

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