

Racial stereotyping persists in 'non-racists'

UNCONSCIOUS stereotypes lurking within even overtly non-racist Americans appear to be leading them to dehumanise black Americans in subtle but important ways.

That is the disturbing conclusion of work by psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt at Stanford University in California and her colleagues. They set out to test if any vestiges remain of a racist stereotype that was common a century ago: that black people are more apelike, and thus less human, than white people.

The team subjected 121 university undergraduates, including 60 whites, 39 asians and seven blacks, to tests that used a technique known as subliminal priming. The students

were briefly flashed a photo of either an African-American or a European-American face, and then shown a blurry picture of an ape. Those who saw the black face were quicker to recognise the ape, the researchers found. This effect was not seen when whites were shown an Asian face. This indicates that the black face had "primed" the volunteers, triggering a subconscious association between blacks and apes, they say.

The effect was found in both white and non-white students. However, there were too few black volunteers in the study to check for an effect with them specifically. The priming persisted even when

volunteers were shown line drawings of faces, or names typical of black or white Americans. This makes it likely that the effect is due to attitudes towards people of African origin and not merely associations with skin colour, the researchers say.

The study also showed that the effect, though subtle, influences white students' perceptions of black people. The researchers asked 115 white volunteers to watch a video of police violently subduing a suspect of indeterminate race, after first priming the students with a subliminal glimpse of a word relating either to apes or to big cats. Those who were primed with ape words were more likely to say the police violence was justified – but only if they were told the suspect was black (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 94, p 292).

The researchers were stunned by their findings, says team member Phillip Atiba Goff of Pennsylvania State University in University Park. "I had to take a couple of days off to just handle it." Experts on the psychology of prejudice agree. "The idea that people would associate other people with animals, and on such an unconscious level, is really provocative," says Susan Fiske at Princeton University.

Even students who showed no signs of racism on a standard test of racist attitudes shared the tendency to associate blacks with apes. Indeed, only 9 per cent of the students said they were even aware that blacks were sometimes stereotyped as apelike.

Subtle cultural biases may be keeping the association alive, the researchers say. For example, when they analysed more than 600 accounts of criminal cases, the team found that accounts of black defendants were more likely to include animalistic descriptors such as "barbaric" and "predator".

Even depictions of human evolution – which often pass through vaguely African-looking ancestors and end with a white *Homo sapiens* – may dehumanise blacks, Eberhardt says. "There is something wrong with the social environment so that these associations still resonate," she says. Bob Holmes ● (See editorial comment, page 5)



2008 LRI Innovative Science Award in conjunction with EUROTOX

The € 100,000 award will be presented to an early career scientist with a concept for creative interdisciplinary research. This could include alternative risk assessment methods using innovative and efficient tools to identify hazards, or new means of securing exposure data. The research should be relevant to the Long-range Research Initiative (LRI), a Chemical industry-funded programme that aims at enhancing scientific knowledge to help protect health and the environment.

The competition covers the broad field of toxicology, including but not limited to:

- Refinement, reduction and replacement of animal use in regulatory testing (3Rs)
- Susceptible populations
- Toxicogenomics and epigenetics
- Exposure assessment
- Effects of mixtures

Applications are due by 3 March 2008

More information? Contact Dr Marc Willuhn (lri@cefic.be)

