Making racism history

Research recently published in the journal Child Development has for the first time ever examined how, if at all, children are affected by historical lessons about racism.

The research consisted of two separate studies led by Julie Hughes, a psychologist at the University of Texas, Austin. In the first study, the authors worked with 48 white children, ages 6-11. Half of the children received a week-long lesson on African-American historical figures, such as baseball icon Jackie Robinson (above), and heard about their experiences of racism. When the other half of the students learned about these figures, they didn’t hear about racism.

The results showed that learning about racism made a significant impact on the kids. Children who were exposed to the racism teachings reported higher positive and less negative attitudes toward African Americans. Through further analysis, the authors concluded that the racism lessons worked because they increased the children’s sense of racial fairness and also their experience of racial guilt, which in turn resulted in higher positive attitudes toward African Americans. Though some may have reservations about inducing guilt in young children, Hughes is quick to point out that any negative effects of racial guilt are likely to be short-term, while this guilt has “the positive long-term outcome of less biased racial attitudes.”

In a second study, the authors repeated their experiment, but this time with a group of African-American children of the same age range. Those African-American students who learned about racism placed greater value on racial fairness, and were more satisfied with the lessons, than were the children whose lessons did not mention racism. However, the African-American students did not generally feel more positive about their own race, or report negative attitudes toward whites. In their Child Development paper, Hughes and her colleagues suggest this may be because African-American children may be more familiar with racism by the time they enter school, and thus are not as likely to be affected by these lessons as are white children. —Mario Aceves

BRAIN TEASER

BY EMILIANA R. SIMON-TOMAS

Q: Are there differences between liberal and conservative brains?

A: In recent years, researchers have been trying to determine whether our political opinions—pro-life or pro-choice? Republican or Democrat?—are guided by fundamental differences between the minds of conservatives and liberals. A number of studies suggest that conservatives think in more structured and stable ways, while liberals reason more flexibly, changing their beliefs as they take new experiences into account.

In October, a study published in the journal Nature Neuroscience found that these differences in thinking may be traceable to brain differences. New York University neuroscientist David Amodio and his colleagues showed that brain responses to quick, unexpected changes in strategy differed between liberals and conservatives. First, research participants rated their political attitude on an 11-point scale, ranging from “very liberal” to “very conservative.” Then, with sensors attached to their scalp, they played a simple computer game requiring them to press a button as fast as they could when a certain shape flashed on their screen. When a different, infrequently occurring shape appeared, however, they were supposed to not press the button. Most made mistakes and hit their button when they weren’t supposed to. With each mistake, the researchers recorded a signal coming from the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region of the brain that signals the presence of conflicting information or competing drives. It was as if their brains were saying, “Oops—I meant to do one thing, but I did another.”

Results showed that the more liberal the participant, the greater the “Oops” brain signal and the fewer the number of mistakes made. The authors conclude that the liberals’ brains were more sensitive to how accurate their ongoing responses were, and were more likely to adapt to changing demands. Conservatives’ brains, on the other hand, might be better equipped for tasks that require a more fixed response style.

It remains unclear whether this difference in brain activity is the cause or a consequence of liberal vs. conservative thinking. That is, scientists don’t know whether these brain differences are innate or develop through years of thinking in a certain way. So far, researchers have found no relationship between political orientation and a variety of heritable traits, suggesting that liberalism and conservatism may not be genetically determined. But Amodio’s study does indicate that, at the very least, our political orientation is linked to the way our brains process the world.

Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas, Ph.D., is a neuroscientist at the University of California, Berkeley. Her Brain Teaser column addresses popular questions, myths, and misconceptions about the neurobiological roots of human behavior and emotion. Email questions to brainteaser@berkeley.edu.