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Transcript

Racial Bias Test

DON IMUS, (Radio Personality): I want to take a moment to apologize for an insensitive and illconceived remark we made the other morning...

SARA JAMES reporting:

While Don Imus has apologized for his racial slurs, he insists he's not a racist. But is it possible that virtually all of us have a hidden racial bias, hidden even from ourselves? Several years ago DATELINE brought together two groups of volunteers, African-American and white, who agreed to take a test scientifically designed to answer just that question.

Here's how it works. These words and faces appear rapidly one after another around the screen. The test taker is supposed to link each one to the left or right box here in the center. Linking positive words like friend to good. Negative words like awful to bad. White faces with white, black faces with black. And it's the mistakes that are so revealing.

Mr. ANTHONY GREENWALD: We find that frequently some people are disturbed by their results. Ready. Go.

JAMES: DATELINE put this experiment to a difficult challenge, testing a cross section of men and women, including some who have impeccable credentials in race relations. People like Rhonda, a civil rights attorney.

RHONDA (Civil Rights Attorney): OK. I'm ready.

Mr. GREENWALD: OK. Here it is.

JAMES: During the first half of the test, black is linked to bad and white is linked to good.

RHONDA: Right. Left.

JAMES: For Rhonda, this half of the test is a breeze. She never makes a mistake.

Mr. GREENWALD: Okay, very good. Now we'll give you the other one.

RHONDA: OK.

JAMES: But let's see how she does when the information is reversed. When the left box marked bad has a
white face and the right box labeled good has a black face.

RHONDA: (Taking test) Left, left...

JAMES: Suddenly the test becomes much more difficult for Rhonda. About a third of the way through, she makes a mistake, linking the white face to the right box even though that shows a black face.

RHONDA: I lost it.

Mr. GREENWALD: OK.

JAMES: Rhonda's score indicates a strong preference for white. Is this because she unconsciously associates white with good?

RHONDA: Well, I could tell when I was taking it I had so much of an easier time doing the white with good, much to my dismay.

Ms. MAHZARIN BANAJI (Harvard University, Co-Creator of Test): We all might be prejudice in ways we're not aware.

JAMES: Mahzarin Banaji of Harvard University and Anthony Greenwald of the University of Washington created this test.

What do you think this test reveals that perhaps we didn't know before?

Ms. BANAJI: How fair are we being when we judge a person?

BETSY (Events Planner): (Taking test) OK.

JAMES: Betsy, an events planner, had similar results.

BETSY: (Taking test) Left, right, right...

JAMES: Once again, on the part of the test which associates black with good and white with bad, a white test taker flounders.

BETSY: I don't know.

Mr. GREENWALD: You hold it--held it together almost to the end.

JAMES: Betsy's test shows a preference for white.

There would be many people who would say what's wrong with showing a preference for your own race?

Mr. GREENWALD: In some contexts it's actually illegal to do so: in employment context, in college admission.

JAMES: But what does all this prove? Like the other participants, Jeff first took the test individually on a computer. And his test, too, revealed a preference for white. But he refused the subsequent studio test saying he doesn't think the experiment reveals anything at all.

JEFF: I think the test for a person like myself who has some spatial difficulties and left/right difficulties is questionable.

JAMES: Professor Banaji, Jeff is questioning your test.

Ms. BANAJI: Well, Jeff's experience is not unusual. Let's say you are having spatial difficulties or let's say you've never used a computer before. It could easily have been the case. But if that was the problem that we could see a strong preference for black over white. But that didn't happen.

JAMES: In fact, this experiment has passed scientific scrutiny. And the results of the professors' experiments have been published in leading psychological journals. Our results reflect the professors' findings.
Ms. BANAJI: Something like 79 or 80 percent of white Americans who take the test show a preference for white over black.

JAMES: And as revealing as those results are, the biggest surprise is yet to come.

JOAN (Sales and Marketing Consultant): Left, left.

JAMES: Joan is a sales and marketing consultant. Even for many black test takers, the more challenging part of the test seems to be when black is associated with good and white with bad.

Mr. GREENWALD: OK. Didn't get halfway through. We'll start over.

JOAN: OK.

Mr. GREENWALD: Ready.

JAMES: After two attempts, she still can't make it to the end.

JOAN: I've done it again.

JAMES: Even so, Joan still thought she'd show a preference for her own race.

Would you be surprised then, Joan, if I said that your test showed a slight preference for whites?

JOAN: Yes, I would be.

JAMES: Does it shock you?

JOAN: Yes. I...

JAMES: You're flabbergasted.

JOAN: I'm flabbergasted.

JAMES: And Joan isn't alone. Dennis is the leader of a civil rights organization. According to his test in the studio, Dennis is neutral. But his individual computer test showed a preference for white. His response?

DENNIS (Civil Rights Organization Leader): All we had in images were whites through the type of media outlets that we were exposed to during my age generation, and that was a constant reinforcement over and over again.

JAMES: Of the African-Americans the professors have tested, 42 percent show a preference for whites. A large number, especially when you consider that only 17 percent of whites show a preference for blacks.

HEATHER (Assistant District Attorney): Left, right.

JAMES: And what of the other African-Americans we tested? Heather is an assistant district attorney. On the part of the test where the black face is paired with the word bad, Heather has noticeable difficulty and can't finish. She showed a strong preference for African-Americans and her pride was unabashed.

HEATHER: It just made me feel more comfortable knowing that I've embraced my culture.

RANDOLPH (High School Music Teacher): Left, left...

JAMES: Randolph, a high school music teacher, also showed a preference for his own race.

Does it concern you at all that you have a strong preference for African-American?

RANDOLPH: Does that score mean that I do not like European Americans? No. Is my subconscious aware of the condition that African-Americans are in this country at this particular point? My conscious is.

JAMES: According to the research, 48 percent of African-Americans have a preference for their own
That's exactly what it comes out as, a strong preference for blacks. The professors note that there's a difference in reactions between blacks and whites when they find out they have a preference for their own race.

BETSY: Of course it bothers me, but I...

JAMES: You could say it's pride or prejudice. What blacks consider a badge of healthy self-esteem, many whites regard as an embarrassing revelation.

BETSY: When I did poorly on the black being good, is it because I can't come to say that I'm bad? And is it just in our nature that there has to be an us and a them, and them it's going to be the bad guy?

JAMES: The professors say this test also reveals something else, something more subtle but equally important, that even unconscious racial biases may affect your behavior. For instance, do white teachers unconsciously favor white students? Jennifer teaches sixth grade.

JENNIFER (Sixth Grade Teacher): Left, left, left, left, right.

JAMES: Jennifer, your score came out as a strong preference for whites. Do you believe that those unconscious attitudes for whites affects your teaching?

JENNIFER: I would hope not. I don't view people by what they look like. I view people on what they can do and what they feel and how they are.

JAMES: These aren't just words and faces on a screen, not just abstract images. This test suggests that when it comes to the potent question of race, our subconscious is making decisions every day.

Group of Protesters: (In unison) Imus must go.

JAMES: Decisions that in real time, in real life have real consequences.

STONE PHILLIPS, anchor:

This test has now become even more widely accepted. It's available in 19 other countries and 16 different languages.