Abstract 589

TITLE: Unconscious Associations About Gay Men and AIDS: Effects on Responses to Framed Messages

AUTHORS: Steward, WT; Salovey, P; Banaji, M

BACKGROUND OBJECTIVES: Prospect theory argues that focusing on gains (e.g., lives saved) will encourage people to choose health programs with certain outcomes, but focusing on losses (e.g., lives lost) will encourage people to choose programs with risky, probabilistic outcomes. This effect is moderated by the subjective value of group being helped. If a decision involves a group that is valued, the gain or loss of members of that group is perceived to be greater than if the decision involves a group that is not valued. The effects of a gain versus loss emphasis are thus larger when decisions involve valued, rather than non-valued, groups. This research design was utilized to determine if the measurement of unconscious concept associations could predict the value placed on the lives of people with AIDS. It was expected that participants with strong associations between AIDS and gay would show less response differences to a gain versus loss emphasis because homosexuality is so highly stigmatized.

METHODS: Participants were asked to choose between two programs to help people with AIDS, who were or were not described as gay men. One program had a certain outcome; one had a risky, probabilistic outcome. Outcomes were framed in terms of the lives each saved or each lost. We measured participants' unconscious association between gay and AIDS using the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Concept association is measured by comparing the speed with which participants sort concept words into different groups. If groups consist of associated concepts (e.g., gay + AIDS), sorting is faster than if groups consist of concepts that are not associated (e.g., straight + AIDS).

RESULTS: When gay men were not mentioned in the decision problem, participants chose the certain option when reading about lives saved but chose the risky option when reading about lives lost (? ^{2} (1) = 9.75, $p < .01$). When the problem mentioned gay men, there were no decision differences resulting from the gain versus loss emphasis (? ^{2} (1) = 0.42, ns), indicating that the lives of this group were less valued. Unconscious associations also explained the results. The IAT indicated that participants generally had associations between gay and AIDS (F (1, 99) = 108.64, $p < .0001$). Whether the problem mentioned gay men or not, those participants with weaker gay-AIDS associations chose the certain option when reading about lives saved and the risky option when reading about lives lost (? ^{2} (1) = 5.67, $p < .05$), while those with stronger gay-AIDS associations did not (? ^{2} (1) = 0.61, ns). The result suggests that the subjective value of people with AIDS is moderated by associations between AIDS and homosexuality.

CONCLUSIONS: The simple association of homosexuality with a group of people can have a large impact on public health decisions because it affects the perceived value of people's lives. This conclusion raises concerns because it demonstrates the potentially serious, but subtle, effects of homophobia.

PRESENTER CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Wayne T. Steward
Address: Department of Psychology
Yale University
P.O. Box 208205
New Haven, CT 06520-8205
Telephone: (203) 752-0653
Fax: (203) 432-7172
Email: wayne.steward@yale.edu