

Checking Our Scripts and Our Voices

Written by Alex Baer

Wednesday, 01 February 2012 19:20 - Last Updated Wednesday, 01 February 2012 19:22

The play may already be over. In fact, it could have been over the moment you were born, before you had a thought in your head, before you learned how to read. Everything we say, mere window dressing, just so much air we shove around.

This is more meditation on that nature-nurture, chicken-and-egg, which-caused-what business.

Low-intelligence children, it is said, are more likely to hold prejudiced attitudes as adults, according to one study at Brock University in Ontario. There's more operating here -- and, a cycle, at that.

Low-intelligence adults tend to gravitate toward socially conservative ideologies, with those ideologies, in turn, stressing hierarchy, resistance to change -- attitudes that can contribute to prejudice, wrote lead researcher Gordon Hodson, a psychologist.

If you're to upset a lot of apple carts of thinking, you might as well do it all at once, get it all over with, landing on intelligence, ideology, and racism, all sprawled out.

University of Virginia psychologist, Brian Nosek, sees the collision of forces here. Whenever someone takes a look at those three variables, he says, "... it's bound to upset somebody."

Nosek agrees prejudice is found to be more common in those who hold right wing ideals than other ideologies -- but that trying to understand why those relationships exist is the unique contribution here.

Everyone is quick to insist that none of this means all liberals are brilliant and all conservatives are stupid. It is simply interesting to look, and to try to see what one can see -- then attempt to connect up the dots in such a way as to be fair, observe any new images there.

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Albert Einstein is never too far away from any scientific conversation. Here he is now: "If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?"

Hodson explained there is reason to believe that strict right-wing ideology might appeal to those having difficulty making sense of a complex world.

"Socially conservative ideologies tend to offer structure and order. Unfortunately, many of these features can also contribute to prejudice," he adds.

Now, connecting the dots early, and invoking Godwin's Law, seems premature at this point -- even though there is a distinct whiff in the air, of the type of the starch used in brown shirts.

We are a species still so young -- we try to find out which is connected to what, and a lot of questions are asked, trying to figure out which ones might best illuminate the path.

This study might trigger in you a memory of another, a year or two back -- one that took a look at that ancient, almond-shaped part of our brains, the amygdala.

You might remember, amygdalas are happiest when they can be in charge of the most primitive emotions, like fear and anxiety.

In that study, researchers from University College London found those who identified as being politically conservative had significantly larger amygdalas.

This group also showed a secondary characteristic many found -- and still find -- equally stunning: their anterior cingulates were found to be smaller. This is a part of the brain thought to be responsible for impulses like courage and optimism.

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Taken together, this one study, some say, showed political conservatives to be general wrecks: High in fear and anxiety, able to respond chiefly in those ways, while simultaneously having fewer resources in courage and optimism, with fewer abilities to repond in those ways.

A different study of the amygdala, in voting, no less, is equally eye-popping. It measured the snap-judgments of voters across cultures. Those reflexive judgments turned out to be excellent predictors of electoral performance. The snap determinations also worked well in measuring perceived threats to the ingroup -- a more-or-less extension of the self.

Also noted were traits valued in leaders. In American and Japanese groups, the former favored traits relating to power; in the latter, preferred traits related to warmth.

Studies like these make me think we're all heavily scripted, before our eyes open, even before we can read -- before we encounter life on any level of thought, before we could encounter Macbeth, before we found ourselves speaking of this life, of a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

If we actors are so heavily scripted as we arrive in this world, armed with our lines years before we make a real entrance, once here, we should remember to study the footnotes and contexts and histories -- we should remember to test out the freedom and power of ad-libbing the lines we find truest.

And: From center stage, too -- not from back in the wings, where understudies drift willy-nilly.

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A few of the many links available for your reading, with many more going unlisted:

Intelligence, ideology, and racsim:

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<http://news.yahoo.com/low-iq-conservative-beliefs-linked-prejudice-180403506.html>

Amygdala size:

<http://goodmenproject.com/newsroom/study-of-the-day-conservative-brains-have-bigger-fear-centers/>

Amygdalas in voting:

<http://scan.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2009/12/05/scan.nsp046.full>