

Incredible Science (8):

From the secret archives of the IgNobel committee

Likeable Germs

Could germs and other bugs serve as an indicator of how much one person likes another? US psychologist LeAnna DeAngelo has been working on this issue for years. More precisely, she confronts her test participants with (rather bad) drawings of fictitious microbial pathogens, who then have to attribute these drawings to certain people: to a loved one, themselves and a foreign person.

The cute and harmless looking germs – resembling a pizza with fried eggs in the drawings – were mostly associated with friends, as expected. What's funny is that microbial agents carried by loved ones were almost always rated as harmless.

However, a different picture emerges when exactly the same germ is judged in association with a hated person. Now, all of a



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sudden, the hitherto innocent subject is described as being dangerous and infectious.

Drawings depicting really nasty-looking germs were mostly attributed to foreign-

ers. What's interesting is the gradation in presumed danger of the germs (present only in the test participants' minds):

- loved one: germ is cute and not dangerous at all
- oneself: germ is "okay"
- enemy: germ is infectious
- foreigner: germ is ugly, dangerous and infectious

LeAnna DeAngelo was so excited by these results that she extended the study and asked the test participants, which germs would be attributed to Mother Theresa, Hitler, Lady Diana, young black people, old Hispanics and so on. In order to exclude too much rational reflection, the descriptions were presented for 50 milliseconds only. The test participants then had to make an instant decision. Very intriguing prejudices emerged:

- Light-skinned people older than eighty harbour the most infectious germs;
- Mother Theresa's germs – if they were still alive – would be completely harmless, regardless of the fact that the holy nun, amongst other things, worked in several leprosy clinics;
- Also, young Hispanics only carry likeable and harmless bugs.

This result was unexpected because it didn't reflect common social prejudices in the USA but rather exposed fears that appear to be considerably deeper-rooted.

By the way, gender differences hardly exist in this "land of fictitious germs".

IgNobel's final assessment: Good times for beauties like Lady Diana, bad times for aging light-skinned gerontocrats. I find this approach most appealing and, you never know, psychologist DeAngelo could be nominated for the IgNobel Biology Prize yet.

(DeAngelo, LeAnna. (2001). Subliminal perception: Biased attributions in matching persons with drawings of germs. J. of Health Psychol 6, 457-466.)