Dear students,

In Semester one you participated in a study titled “Social Relations in Australia” about perceptions of human nature and attitudes towards Indigenous Australians. This study was conducted as part of a fourth year Honours project by me, Katie Greenaway, under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. Thank you very much for participating, I really appreciate it! Below I’ve included a brief summary of the results. If you would like to ask any questions about the research or findings, you can contact me at kgreenaw@psy.uq.edu.au. You can find a summary of some other studies investigating social group processes at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

**Purpose of the study**

Research has shown that strained intergroup relations can be improved if people think of their own and another group as part of one superordinate category. The ultimate extension of this strategy is to highlight people’s shared membership to the human race. Some researchers have found that encouraging people to think of other groups in terms of shared humanity improves intergroup attitudes (Wohl & Branscombe, 2005). However, some others have found that this can negatively impact attitudes when human nature is thought of as fundamentally negative (Morton & Postmes, 2007).

The primary goal of this study was to investigate White Australians’ attitudes towards Indigenous Australians when they focused on their shared humanity. We also looked at how attitudes would be affected if people were encouraged to think of human nature as fundamentally positive (i.e., social and altruistic) or negative (i.e., aggressive and self-interested), although some people in the control condition just indicated their own personal perception of human nature.

**Demographic information**

From April to June 2007, 174 undergraduate psychology students completed this study. Some people participated for course credit while others were approached in the UQ refectory at St Lucia. Because we were interested in the attitudes of White Australians, the data from people who did not identify as White/European or Australian were not analysed in the final results reported below. Participants’ ages ranged from 17 to 40, although the majority were 21 or younger (mean age = 19.80). Most participants (67%) were female.
Results of the study

1. Prejudice towards Indigenous Australians: we found that when people focused on shared humanity they reported less prejudice towards Indigenous Australians, but only when they thought of human nature as fundamentally positive. People who thought of human nature as negative and those who reported their own perception of human nature did not differ in their levels of prejudice. This was consistent with other research that suggests emphasising shared humanity can go towards improving intergroup relations.

2. Support for Indigenous Australians: we found a similar pattern with people’s support for Indigenous Australians to engage in collective action. When shared humanity was emphasised and human nature was seen as positive, people showed more support.

3. Negative effects of emphasising shared humanity: although the above results suggest that getting people to focus on shared humanity is a good thing, we also found that this led people to think of inequalities between White and Indigenous Australians as more legitimate. In other words, when focused on shared humanity, people tended to think of the currently disadvantaged status of Indigenous Australians as deserved and “the way things should be”. Moreover, emphasising shared humanity and positive human nature reduced collective guilt of White Australians over the inequalities faced by Indigenous Australians.

Conclusion

Interestingly, we found that emphasising shared humanity can have both positive and negative effects on intergroup attitudes. While it served to reduce prejudice towards and increase support for Indigenous Australians, it also increased acceptance of social inequalities. These effects were only found when human nature was portrayed as fundamentally positive. We think that getting people to focus on shared humanity could have mixed effects on intergroup relations.

Thanks again!

I really appreciate the time you took to take part in this study. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at the email address supplied above. If you would like to know more about issues involving Indigenous Australians, please check out the website for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at UQ: http://www.atsis.uq.edu.au/.