Misspeaking from the heart: Juan Williams controversy bring ups issue of cultural biases

By LONA O'CONNOR

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Juan Williams got tangled up in the endless video loop of shame this week, joining a growing list of his colleagues in the media.

Williams, a correspondent for National Public Radio and Fox News television, made the career-changing remark that people in "Muslim garb" make him nervous on airplanes.

The results were mixed. NPR, the flagship of politically correct, liberal journalism, fired him. Fox, the home of conservative mouthpieces Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck, gave him a big raise.

Williams said he was "outraged" and "brokenhearted" that NPR took his remarks out of context. The radio network countered that this was not the first time Williams had pushed the envelope, but it would be the last.

It was only last year that Williams, who is black, spoke as the voice of reason on a network news program, trying to sort out why a black Harvard professor was misidentified by police as a burglar in his own home.

Many people might have admitted similar fears about people in "Muslim garb," but in the privacy of their living rooms.

"I believe everybody is prejudiced," said Maria Santamarina, who teaches classes about prejudice at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. "We all have stereotypes about each other - whites, blacks, across the board. Culture is handed down, and part of our culture is these stereotypes and biases. We are taught to hold prejudices. That's how we are raised."

Racial attitudes are not about appearance or biology but are formed by our cultures, said Bryan Page, head of the anthropology department at the University of Miami. What people look like is "genetically very trivial" to anthropologists but key to how people subconsciously size each other up.

For example, to say that a man "looks Muslim" might mean he has a dark mustache or beard, dark hair and dark eyes. The same description could fit a man from Latin America or Israel.
Most people are not comfortable with others who do not look, talk and act as they do, Page said. That discomfort arises from ancient survival strategies.

But in terms of humanity's short history, we are doing about as well as can be expected on the tolerance front, Page said.

"The time we have been exposed to people not like us is relatively short, even if you estimate it at 10,000 years," he said. "Pluralistic societies that have lots of people different from each other are relatively recent experiments."

Since May, at least five high-profile people have made remarks that shocked the viewing or listening public.

There will be more, Page said. It's a matter of increased opportunities.

"On these all-news stations, they get comfortable in front of the camera, so once in a while the cerebral cortex doesn't get involved in the utterance," Page said. "Everybody has these lapses, but it's a matter of probability that if you're on television or radio a whole lot, the lapses become more likely."

Foot-in-mouth syndrome can occur even in people who do not think they are prejudiced.

After all, Williams set himself up by beginning his ill-fated remarks with the classic "Look, Bill, I'm not a bigot"

The problem is that people are not merely reluctant to reveal their biases, Santamarina said. They are afraid to know something that disturbing about themselves.

In prejudice-reduction exercises, she instructs pairs of people to list as many racial stereotypes as they can. That's easy. The hard part is reading the stereotypes to a roomful of people.

Santamarina asks the other people in the room how it feels to hear those words. "They say that it hurts," she said.

One student dropped out of her class, telling her that he found it too painful to look at himself in such a frank way.

"This is how difficult these issues are," she said. "It's very hard to like yourself when you start thinking about this."

Perhaps the best way to understand prejudice is to walk in the other person's shoes - or burqa.

One student whose mother is Cuban and father is African-American wore a burqa, the long garment that covers all but the face of a devout Muslim woman, for her job at a Muslim elementary school in Boca Raton.
One day, in a hurry, she wore the burqa as she drove home.

"She was screamed at in the street by some guy who started following her," Santamarina said. "She said to me, 'Oh, my God, now I know what it's like.'"

The irony of Williams' gaffe is that he might have been punished for trying to be honest, Page said.

"I think he was trying to say, 'Look, these emotions impact on everybody, even me.'"

Staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.

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