Race matters to 3-month-olds, study finds

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You should judge someone not by the color of his skin, civil-rights leader Martin Luther King declared 43 years ago, but by the content of his character. Yet new research suggests that to achieve this ideal, you may have unlearn years' worth of mental habits -- a daunting number of years. Such as your current age, minus three months.

That's because a study has found that by this age -- three months -- many babies start to prefer faces of people from their own race to those of another race. This early favoritism may represent the first glimmers of racial prejudice, psychologists say.

But don't start fretting about racist babies yet. On the bright side, the researchers also found that babies raised with frequent exposure to people of other races don't develop this early bias. This discovery may help guide future research on how to counter racism, they suggested.

"Early preferences for own-race faces may contribute to race-related biases later in life," the psychologists wrote in a paper on the study, published in the February issue of the research journal Psychological Science. Typically, "by the age of 4 to 6 years, children already display racial stereotyping and prejudice in a variety of contexts."

The researchers -- Yair Bar-Haim of Tel-Aviv University, Israel, and colleagues -- noted that previous studies had found infants tend to recognize faces from their own race better than those from other races. But theirs was the first to suggest an actual preference for same-race faces at this early age, they added.

They studied 36 infants from three groups: white babies raised among mainly white people in Israel; black infants similarly raised among their own people, in Africa; and black babies raised in a mixed black-and-white environment.

The researchers sat each baby on its mother's lap and in front of a computer screen. Some clicking sounds and visual effects then appeared on the screens to draw the infants' attention. Next, eight pairs of photos of black and white faces appeared onscreen, side by side, in succession.

The researchers analyzed whether the babies spent more time looking at the white or black faces. This is a standard sort of psychology test, they wrote; psychologists generally believe longer gazes at one face indicate preference for it. The researchers tried to match faces in each pair for attractiveness, so that this wouldn't sway the young participants' preferences.

White babies raised in white environments spent an average of 63 percent more time looking at white faces, the study found. Their African-raised counterparts spent 23 percent more time looking at faces from their own race than the other. Black babies raised in mixed-race environments spent roughly equal amounts of time looking at both types.

This suggests that "significant exposure to other-race faces can block the development of own-race preference," Bar-Haim and colleagues wrote.

Many researchers in recent years have been interested in how racial prejudice develops, and even whether it might have evolutionary functions. Some have suggested prejudice may actually have been useful for primitive humans, by motivating them to protect their tribes from ill-intentioned strangers. "It was adaptive for our ancestors to be attuned to those outside the group who posed threats," said Arizona State University social psychologist Steven Neuberg last year.

Unfortunately, he added, prejudice can also be turned against people who pose no threat. Today, mainstream Western societies tend to consider prejudice an unmitigated evil, a cause of social strife, injustice, and even -- some studies have found -- health problems, possibly caused by the continual stress of living on racism's receiving end.

Research such as the baby study could help scientists understand ways to reduce racism, Bar-Heim's team contends. For instance, they wrote, a key goal for future research would be to demark "the critical period during which early-formed preferences for own-race faces may be altered by exposure to other-race faces."

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The original story can be found here.