

# A face by any other name: Seeing racial bias

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If Barack Obama had taken his mother's surname and kept his childhood nickname, American voters might literally see "Barry Dunham" as a quite different presidential candidate, a new study suggests. A name significantly changes our perception of someone's face and race, according to research in the journal, *Perception*.

Participants in the study - titled Barack Obama or Barry Dunham? - rated multi-racial faces with European names as looking significantly "more European" than exactly the same multi-racial faces when given Asian names. Earlier research had established that people tend to be better and more accurate at recognising faces of their own race than those of a different race, an effect called the own-race bias: colloquially, the feeling that people of a different race "all look the same to me".

This bias has far-reaching negative effects, most notably the observation that eyewitnesses to crimes are more likely to incorrectly identify a perpetrator of a different race. By gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms driving the bias, researchers are hoping to devise strategies to minimise its effects.

The study by researchers at the UNSW School of Psychology aimed to test the hypothesis that the presence of racially-suggestive names would influence participants' perception of identical multiracial faces, resulting in multiracial faces being judged to look more like the racial group suggested by their name.

In the experiment, 64 participants were asked to rate the appearance of

Asian-Australian faces given typically Asian names, European-Australian faces given typically European names, multiracial faces given Asian names, and multiracial faces given European names. The participants comprised 32 Asian-Australian students and 32 European-Australian students.

Morphing the image of an Asian male with the image of a European male created the multiracial stimulus faces. Morphing together two Asian faces created the Asian stimulus faces, and morphing together two European faces created the European stimulus faces.

For each trial, after viewing the face and name for 3 seconds, participants rated the appearance of the face on a 9-point scale, where 1="very Asian-looking" and 9="very European-looking".

"The study reveals how socially derived expectations and stereotypes can influence face perception," says co-author and UNSW PhD student, Kirin Hilliar. "The result is consistent with other research findings suggesting that once people categorise a face into a racial group, they look for features consistent with that categorization."

For example, a 2001 study found that multiracial (half Hispanic, half African-American) composite faces given stereotypically African-American hairstyles were perceived by both African-American and Hispanic participants as having darker skin, wider mouths, and less protruding eyes compared to the same faces given Hispanic hairstyles.

"The own-race bias is often revealed in people being relatively poor at encoding and recalling the facial characteristics of an unfamiliar racial group," according to Dr Richard Kemp, a face-recognition expert and co-author. "This study reveals that non-physical features such as a name can influence people's interpretation of facial characteristics."

Ms Hilliar adds: "The next step in our research is to investigate whether these racially-suggestive names not only influence people's perception of multiracial faces, but also how well they will recognize these same faces later on."

Source: University of New South Wales

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