

Racial biases fade away toward members of your own group

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White people don't show hints of unconscious bias against blacks who belong to the same group as them, a new study suggests.

But this lack of [bias](#) only applied to black [people](#) in their group, according to the findings. Most [white people](#) in the study still showed evidence of some unconscious bias towards blacks who were in an opposing group, or who were unaffiliated with either group.

What impressed the researchers, however, was just how quickly these group bonds could form. The lack of bias toward fellow black group members was uncovered just minutes after whites joined the mixed-race group, and without participants even meeting their fellow members personally.

"The results suggest that when we share some kind of identity with a group of people, we automatically and immediately feel positively toward them, regardless of race," said Jay Van Bavel, co-author of the study and post-doctoral fellow in psychology at Ohio State University.

"You can think in terms of people who go to the playground and play a game of pickup basketball. All it takes is a flip of a coin to make someone your teammate, and at least for that game, you're going to feel positively toward your teammates, white and black."

Van Bavel conducted the study with William Cunningham, assistant professor of psychology at Ohio State. Their study appears in the March

issue of the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

The study involved two separate but related experiments with college students, one done in Canada and one in the United States.

The students took a computer test commonly used by psychologists to reveal unconscious, or automatic racial bias. The test examines people's first reactions to seeing a black face, before their conscious mind can edit and override biases.

Even though most people disavow any racial bias, this test consistently shows that about three-quarters of white North Americans have some level of unconscious racial bias, Van Bavel said. These unconscious thoughts can lead people to make biased decisions without realizing they are being biased.

For example, a manager may pass over a resume of a person whose name suggests she is an African American, without even recognizing why he is doing it, according to Van Bavel.

The computer test flashes pictures of black and white faces quickly on the screen followed nearly instantaneously by positive words (such as love) or negative words (such as hatred). Participants have to very quickly - within about one-half of a second -- categorize the words as positive or negative.

In general, white people find it more difficult to correctly classify positive words when they were first shown a photo of a black person.

"Seeing a black face automatically activates this association with negative things for many white people and if they don't have time to correct this negative image - which they don't in this study - they associate negative words with black faces," Cunningham said.

In the first experiment, 109 students at the University of Toronto were randomly assigned to one of two groups made up for the study - one named the Lions and the other called the Tigers. A control group learned about the two groups, but was not assigned to either one of them.

Members of the Lions and Tigers were shown photos of the members of both groups, and told it was important to learn who belonged to their team, and who belonged to other team.

Later, they were given the computer bias test. Results showed that students in the control group, who were not a member of either mixed-race group, showed a preference for white faces over black faces, as was expected.

But white members of the two teams showed no bias against black members of their own teams. They did, however, show bias towards black members of the opposing team.

"Team members were evaluating people based on whether they were on the same team - not evaluating them based on their race," Cunningham said.

The second experiment involved 126 students at Ohio State. The setup was essentially the same, except that participants also evaluated white and black faces that were not members of either of the two groups. Results showed that white students showed no bias against blacks who belonged to their team. They showed nearly equivalent levels of bias towards black members of the opposing team, and black members who were not associated with either team.

This suggests that whites were showing increased positive feelings toward black members of their own team, but not increased negative feelings toward blacks who belonged to the opposing team.

"White students felt the same toward blacks on the opposing team and people who didn't belong to any team," Van Bavel said. "That means liking people from your team doesn't mean you have to hate members of the other team."

Van Bavel said the unconscious biases studied in this research have real-life consequences.

"What's dangerous about these attitudes is that they can come into play even when we're not aware of them, and even when we think we are being egalitarian," he said.

But this study suggests there may be ways to battle this unconscious, automatic racism.

"We want to change how people see someone at the very earliest stages. If you see someone as a member of your own team or group, race may not even come to mind. You are thinking about that person in terms of some kind of shared relationship," Van Bavel said.

In the real world, this means creating contexts to show how people are connected whenever possible. This may mean emphasizing our shared identities as residents of a city, fans of a sports team or members of a church.

"It's part of human nature to feel positively about members of our own group," Cunningham said. "The challenge is to find ways to call attention to our shared identities."

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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