

If you demonstrate that 'Black Lives Matter,' others will too

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The "Black Lives Matter" hashtag evolved as a call for social change aimed at increasing the conversation about racial inequality. But what if social change was less dependent on talking and more dependent on nonverbal communication?

New research finds observing a white American engage in small nonverbal acts such as smiling more often, making eye contact for longer periods of time, and standing in closer proximity to a [black](#) American makes the observer less prone to racial biases. Specifically, small acts of positivity by white Americans towards African Americans and other black Americans causes observers to hold fewer stereotypes about black Americans and to have more positive attitudes towards black Americans in general.

The findings are described in "Some Evidence for the Nonverbal Contagion of Racial Bias," (*Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, June 2015), co-authored by Dana R. Carney, assistant professor, University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business; Greg Willard, research associate, Harvard University; and Kyonne-Joy Isaac, graduate student, Princeton University.

"Prejudice is often less overt. It manifests often as micro acts of aggression," says Carney. "What is hopeful is that our study also indicates that positive [behavior](#) toward different social groups can be contagious."

Four related experiments to test the contagious effects of racial bias produced these results:

- Observers of micro-positive behavior toward a black American subject formed more positive impressions.
- Observers of micro-positive behavior toward a black American subject adopted fewer racial stereotypes.
- Observers of micro-positive behavior toward a black American subject were found to have less [racial bias](#) towards black Americans in general.
- Observers must also be aware that negative social behavior is being directed toward a black person in order to produce a pro-black bias outcome.

The experiments consisted of participants who were randomly assigned to watch one of two types of videos. In one type of video, highly biased white Americans exhibited small, negative, and nonverbal behaviors of bias, such as less smiling, less leaning in, and less gazing, toward a black American. The second type of video showed whites who held black Americans in high regard and naturally expressed their positive biases through more smiling, more leaning in, and more gazing.

In Experiment 1, for example, participants rated the black American in the video on how much they liked or disliked the person or whether or not they would want to be friends with this person. They also rated the black American on six adjectives: kind, considerate, thoughtful, hostile, unfriendly, dislikeable. The results: participants liked and wanted to be friends with the black American who was on the receiving end of positive micro nonverbal behaviors significantly more than they liked and wanted to be friends with black Americans who received negative nonverbal micro aggressions.

More information: *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision*

Processes, June 2015. www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0749597815000291

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