

# Study investigates whether blind people characterize others by race

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Most people who meet a new acquaintance, or merely pass someone on the street, need only a glance to categorize that person as a particular race. But, sociologist Asia Friedman wondered, what can we learn about that automatic visual processing from people who are unable to see?

Friedman, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Delaware, set out to explore that question by interviewing 25 individuals who are blind. She will present her findings in a study at the 110th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA).

"The visual process of assigning [race](#) is instantaneous, and it's an example of automatic thinking—it happens below the level of awareness," Friedman said. "With blind people, the process is much slower as they piece together information about a person over time. Their thinking is deliberative rather than automatic, and even after they've categorized someone by race, they're often not certain that they're correct."

In fact, she said, blind people categorize many fewer people by race than do sighted people, who assign a race to virtually everyone they see. For those who are blind, the slower process of assigning race generally takes place only when they have extensive interactions with a person, not with passersby or during casual encounters.

"Many of my subjects said they thought that being blind made them less likely to develop stereotypes," Friedman said. However, the interviews

revealed that many of them did hold cultural stereotypes or make racial assumptions, even though their definition of race was not based on appearance.

Friedman's study breaks new ground, with little previous research done on the subject. An earlier study found that blind people think of race in visual terms, even though they rely on senses other than sight. But Friedman's subjects generally did not think of race visually.

Additionally, unlike the earlier study, which included only people who were born blind, Friedman's study considered individuals who were born without sight as well as people who became blind later in life. Friedman found some differences between those groups.

In conclusion, she said, the study shows a need to consider non-visual ways of thinking about race. Social scientists have looked at race as an unambiguous characteristic, even though it doesn't exist biologically, but her in-depth interviews with [blind people](#) show that there

Provided by American Sociological Association

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