

Perceived 'whiteness' of Middle Eastern Americans correlates with discrimination

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A new Rutgers-led study examined discriminatory attitudes toward Middle Eastern and North African Americans. Credit: Rutgers University

The perceived 'whiteness' of Americans of Middle Eastern and North African descent is indirectly tied to discrimination against them, and may feed a "negative cycle" in which public awareness of discrimination leads to more discrimination, according to a Rutgers-led study.

The study, published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, points out a tension between the fact that Middle Eastern and North African Americans are instructed to select "white" on U.S. Census forms, although they are culturally perceived as not being white.

"Middle Eastern and North African Americans are left in a precarious position of not being legally classified as a racial minority group, while at the same time not being able to fully occupy the white racial category," said study co-author Kimberly Chaney, a doctoral graduate student in [social psychology](#) at Rutgers University-New Brunswick's School of Arts and Sciences.

The researchers reviewed the extent to which discriminatory attitudes toward Middle Eastern and North African Americans is tied to the perception of them as white or not white.

A group of white adults were asked whether they supported discriminatory policies such as "America would be safer if we prevent Middle Easterners from entering the country" or "America would be safer if there was a registry of Middle Easterners." Then they were shown faces with a range of complexions, and asked to indicate which one most represented Middle Eastern Americans.

Those who saw Middle Eastern Americans as typically white were less likely to support discriminatory practices against them. Those who viewed Middle Eastern Americans as less typically white were more likely to support discriminatory policies.

The researchers also examined whether highlighting the discrimination faced by Middle Eastern and North African Americans would shift perceptions of them. After reading an article about discrimination against Middle Easterners in the United States, a group of white adults were more likely to perceive Middle Eastern Americans as not being white. But the researchers noted that if awareness of discrimination leads white Americans to see Middle Easterners as "less white," this perception may, in turn, lead to more discrimination.

"It is a negative cycle of exclusion and discrimination," said Diana

Sanchez, a professor of psychology.

The next step for the research would involve examining Middle Eastern and North African Americans' own experiences and self-identities, the researchers said.

More information: Kimberly E. Chaney et al, White Categorical Ambiguity: Exclusion of Middle Eastern Americans From the White Racial Category, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2020). DOI: [10.1177/1948550620930546](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620930546)

Provided by Rutgers University

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