

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Reducing Racism by Reducing Awareness of Race

A new UC Santa Barbara study concludes that the degree to which individuals notice and remember each other's race is far more variable -- and changeable -- than previously thought.

According to a study to be published Tuesday (Dec. 11) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, experiments show that only a few minutes of exposure to a world in which race is irrelevant to intergroup competition is enough to strongly undermine people's awareness of each other's race.

The research was conducted by researchers associated with UC Santa Barbara's Center for Evolutionary Psychology:

UCSB's John Tooby, professor of anthropology, and Leda Cosmides, professor of psychology; and Robert Kurzban, a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA who received his PhD in psychology at UCSB.

Decades of previous experiments at many universities had led many researchers to the conclusion that people had a strong, non-conscious tendency to note and remember someone's race when they form an impression, and that this was difficult or perhaps impossible to change.

If true, this would be discouraging, the authors write, "because categorizing others by their race is a precondition for treating them differently according to race" -- that

is, for racism.

However, this conclusion seemed implausible to the researchers, because it was inconsistent with what was known about human evolution.

"Human hunter-gatherers would rarely, if ever, have encountered a person of a different race," Cosmides said.

"So natural selection would not have built mechanisms into the human brain for processing events that never happened."

"However, since people do readily note race in modern societies," Tooby said, "it had to be an expression of some other brain mechanism, one that race happens to trigger as a byproduct."

Because political conflict between alliances was a regular part of our ancestors' lives, the researchers theorized that humans had evolved brain mechanisms designed to note a person's membership in shifting coalitions and alliances.

If this were true, they reasoned, then race was only being noted by the brain because in current social contexts, racial appearance often predicted patterns of cooperation and alliance -- and coalitional alliances were something the mind was designed to notice and remember.

This led them to predict that awareness of race would be decreased when subjects are exposed to a social environment where race no longer predicted who was allied with whom.

The experiments they conducted strongly supported these predictions.

"We were startled by just how easy it was to diminish the tendency to note and remember another person's race" the researchers say, once they hit upon coalition as the key.

Despite the fact that people tested in the experiments had years of prior experience in social environments where race carried some social significance, "less than four minutes of exposure to an alternative social world in which race was irrelevant to the prevailing system of alliance caused a dramatic decrease in the extent to which they categorized others by race."

The authors' caution that racism is a complex social phenomenon with many dimensions, and no single study throws light on more than one corner of the problem.

Still, finding that categorizing others by their race is not inevitable is reason for optimism, the authors say.

The authors have put more information on The Center for Evolutionary Psychology's website: www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep

About UC Santa Barbara

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