

How ‘impermanence’ can help us all get along

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The Boston Globe:

WE ARE BORN colorblind—literally. Newborn color vision is limited, lacking many of the visual distinctions that characterize mature sight. Soon enough, though, color takes over, figuratively as well as physiologically: We learn to see ourselves and others as parts of particular groups. Are we black or white? Male or female? What’s our religion, our language, our preference in music or food? Each time a child hears a description of a person or witnesses a human interaction, it contributes to the formation of her identity and sense of her role in the world.

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Now, however, new research is suggesting that there may be a way to circumvent this predilection: The key is to change how we perceive the permanence of our own personal qualities. If we think an identity or a situation in our own lives is fixed and unchangeable, researchers at Stanford University and the University of Waterloo found, we are more inclined to negatively judge others who don’t share that identity. Intriguingly, however, this perception of permanence is open to adjustment. By reminding people that the categories we fall into may not be so fixed, we seem to be able to defuse the assumption that everyone would be happier if only they were like us.

To the researchers, what happens when we play up the malleability of our identities has implications for how we can learn to coexist more peacefully. After all, our desire for people to be like us “is something that obscures our ability to respect other people’s preferences,” notes study first author Kristin Laurin, a professor of organizational behavioral at Stanford Business School.

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That question led to a collaboration with University of Waterloo social psychologists David Kille and Richard Eibach, on a series of studies that have now been published in *Psychological Science*. The studies examined the perception of stability in relationships—and how that perception in turn affected attitude and judgment about others. What the researchers learned, over four separate experiments, was that the more we perceive own relationship status (that is, single or coupled) as stable, the more we idealize that status and the more favorably we judge others who share it—and on the flip side, the less favorably we judge those who don’t.

Read the whole story: [*The Boston Globe*](#)