

New Study Discovers Why Few People Are Devoid of Racial Bias

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Why are some individuals *not* prejudiced? That is the question posed by a provocative new study appearing in the September issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. The authors investigate how some individuals are able to avoid prejudicial biases despite the pervasive human tendency to favor one's own group.

Robert Livingston of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and Brian Drwecki of the University of Wisconsin conducted studies that examined white college students who harbored either some or no racial biases. What is remarkable about the findings is that only seven percent did not show any racial bias (as measured by implicit and explicit psychological tests), and that nonbiased individuals differed from biased individuals in a psychologically fundamental way—they were less likely to form negative affective associations in general.

Subjects completed a task that repeatedly paired unfamiliar Chinese characters with pictures that evoked positive or negative emotions (e.g., puppies or snakes). The objective was to see whether unfamiliar Chinese characters could evoke emotions by simply being paired with pictures that evoked these emotions (i.e., classical conditioning). Results showed that nonbiased individuals were less likely than biased individuals to acquire negative affect toward characters that were paired with negative pictures. This implies that people who display less racial bias may be more resistant to the kinds of real-world conditioning that leads to racial bias in our society.

The results suggest that “whether someone is prejudiced or not is linked to their cognitive propensity to resist negative affective conditioning,” according to the authors. Thus, reducing prejudice may require more than simply adopting egalitarian values. Instead, such change may require reconditioning of the negative associations that people hold.

“Just as it is difficult to change visceral reactions to aversive foods (e.g., lima beans) through sheer force of will,” writes Livingston, “it may also be difficult to change visceral attitudes toward racial groups by acknowledging that prejudice is wrong and wanting to change.” The authors argue that although negative affect cannot be reduced by reason alone, it could be reconditioned through positive interpersonal experiences or exposure to more positive images of Blacks in the media.