

# People Present Themselves in Ways That Counteract Prejudices Toward Their Group

April 16, 2013

Individuals from stigmatized groups choose to present themselves in ways that counteract the specific stereotypes and prejudices associated with their group, according to a new study published in [\*Psychological Science\*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“People often think of prejudice as a simple, single phenomenon — general dislike for members of other groups — but recent research suggests that there are actually multiple, distinct types of prejudice,” says graduate student Rebecca Neel, who conducted the research with her advisor Steven Neuberg and post-doctoral scholar Samantha Neufeld at Arizona State University.

Neel and colleagues wanted to see whether people would be aware of the stereotypes associated with their group and whether they would opt for strategies that counteract those specific stereotypes in order to make a good first impression.

The researchers recruited 75 college students, all of whom had self-identified as overweight or not overweight, to participate in a study about “impressions of groups.” The students were told that they would answer questions about three groups randomly chosen out of a total pool of ten; in fact, everyone received questions about the same groups: Muslims, Mexican Americans, and obese people.

In a separate part of the study, the students imagined that they were going to meet someone new and ranked eight different strategies for making a good first impression. The strategies included arriving on time, looking interested, smiling, appearing relaxed, and wearing clean clothes.

Some of the participants ranked the eight strategies before receiving the questions about the three groups; others ranked them afterward, so that group-related stereotypes would be fresh in their mind.

Regardless of their own weight, the students perceived conventional stereotypes about obese people. They believed that most people feel disgust toward obese individuals and see them as a threat to their health.

But, just as the researchers predicted, overweight and non-overweight students did show differences in how they ranked the strategies for making a good impression.

Overweight participants who were primed to think about group stereotypes were more likely to prioritize wearing clean clothes than participants in the other conditions — they ranked this strategy, on average, as most important. Non-overweight participants and overweight participants who hadn’t been primed tended to give “arriving on time” the highest ranking.

These findings suggest that overweight participants considered wearing clean clothes to be an important

strategy for managing other people's first impressions and diminishing the specific emotion — disgust — that underlies prejudice toward obese people.

The results were supported by a second study that included college students from two stigmatized groups: overweight men and Black men.

Once again, the students' reports fell in line with typical stereotypes: Overweight men thought that other people viewed their group as posing a threat of disease, while Black men thought that other people saw their group as posing a threat of violence. And they ranked their impression strategies accordingly.

As before, overweight men ranked wearing clean clothes as more important when stereotypes about obese people were top-of-mind. Black men, on the other hand, viewed smiling — a strategy useful for 'disarming' concerns about ill intentions — as more important when they were primed to think about stereotypes related to African Americans.

Thus, the participants adopted different strategies for managing a first impression, depending on their own group membership and the salience of specific stereotypes and prejudices about their group.

Neel and colleagues argue that this research demonstrates that stigma doesn't manifest as just general negativity; it involves specific emotions that are felt toward specific groups. People's experiences being on the receiving end of these emotions leads them to use different strategies for managing prejudice.

So, whether it's a job interview, a performance evaluation, or a casual social encounter, "members of stigmatized groups may strategically change how they present themselves to others in anticipation of these different emotions," says Neel.

The researchers believe that this research offers a new way of looking at an important social topic:

"Psychology has long been interested in understanding where prejudice comes from, and there's a body of more recent work that seeks to understand prejudice and stereotyping from the target's perspective" the researchers point out. "Our research is part of a growing program that demonstrates the tight links between the psychology of prejudiced perceivers and the psychology of those targeted by these prejudices."