

They All Look the Same: Why we are Unable to Distinguish Faces of Other Races (and Sometimes Our Own)

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There's a troubling psychological phenomenon that just about everyone has experienced but few will admit to; having difficulty distinguishing between people of different racial groups.

This isn't merely a nod to the denigrating expression "they all look the same." Indeed, the "cross-race effect" is one of the most well replicated findings in psychological research and can lead to embarrassment, social castigation, or the disturbingly common occurrence of eye-witness misidentifications.

Although a potentially charged experience, the causes of the cross-race effect are unclear. In one camp, psychologists argue that in a society where de facto segregation is the norm, people often don't have much practice with individuals of other racial groups and are thus less capable of recognizing distinguishing features.

But researchers from Miami University have a different idea of why the cross-race effect occurs. They argue this effect arises from our tendency to categorize people into in-groups and out-groups based on social categories like social class, hobbies, and of course, race.

In a series of experiments, Miami University undergraduates were led to believe that they would view the faces of fellow Miami students (the in-group) and students from Marshall University (a perennial football rival, making them the ultimate out-group) on a computer screen.

In reality, none of the faces, all of whom were white, were students at either university. By merely labeling them, however, the participants better recognized faces that they believed were fellow Miami students.

The study, conducted by psychologist Kurt Hugenberg and graduate students Michael Bernstein and Steven Young, will be published in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Hugenberg and his colleagues believe the study suggests that recognition deficits can occur without the need for race or different physical characteristics, arguing instead that there is more than just unfamiliarity with other races at play in the cross-race effect.

According to the researchers, "people frequently split the world up into *us* and *them*, in other words into social groups, be they racial, national, occupational, or even along the lines of university affiliation. Our work suggests that the cross-race effect is due, at least in part, to this ubiquitous tendency to see the world in terms of these in-groups and out-groups."