

Prejudice or perception?

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Expecting to be treated with prejudice may be part of a self-fulfilling prophecy, according to new research led by a University of Toronto psychologist.

The groundbreaking study was done using a series of computer-animated male and female faces expressing a range of looks, from rejection to acceptance. Researchers created a slide show where the expressions on the animated faces morphed from looks of rejection to looks of acceptance, and study participants were asked to identify the point at which the expressions changed.

"Those female participants who told us men stereotyped them and treated them with prejudice saw rejection and contempt on the animated men's faces more readily and for a longer period of time than they did on the women's faces," says lead author Dr. Michael Inzlicht, assistant professor of psychology at U of T. "This shows that a person's level of sensitivity to being stereotyped – their expectation that a person will behave prejudicially towards them – may distort their perception of reality."

On average, female participants who identified themselves as stigma-conscious saw expressions of contempt for a half-second longer on the men's animated faces than they did on the women's faces – even though both sets of animated faces expressed looks of contempt for the same amount of time.

Inzlicht warns against blaming the victim, though. "These prejudice

expectations come from actual experiences of prejudice so it's very possible that the women who are vigilant for rejection are in fact more likely to objectively experience prejudice in everyday life."

Inzlicht said this joint study with University of Washington and University of California researchers is crucial for improving communications between diverse populations.

"We've always known that stereotyping by dominant groups can negatively impact communications between groups," Inzlicht said. "This study shows it's also important to consider how the expectations and perceptions of marginalized groups can impact relations. Both sides play a crucial role."

The study appears in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Source: University of Toronto

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