

Research finds cross-race friendships can lower stress

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Conventional wisdom holds that diversity pays off in higher education. Now researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, have found scientific evidence that multiculturalism improves students' experiences on college campuses.

A new UC Berkeley study suggests that making friends with someone from a different race or ethnicity can reduce anxiety in academic settings among both whites and minorities. To arrive at this conclusion, researchers paired up students prone to racial biases, both white and Latino, and through an accelerated friendship process found that members of both groups benefitted from getting to know one another.

In one finding, published in the November issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers found that as both white and Latino students in the study got to know one another better, their cortisol levels dropped significantly. Cortisol is a hormone triggered by stress and anxiety.

In another set of UC Berkeley findings published in an earlier issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, Latinos at UC Berkeley and African Americans at Columbia University in New York who were concerned about being the targets of discrimination reported feeling a greater sense of belonging and satisfaction on campus after making a friend of another race or ethnicity.

"Regardless of students' majority or minority status, the friendship

helped," said UC Berkeley psychologist Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton, a co-author of the study, whose research examines the relationship between the acceptance of minorities at historically white campuses and students' sense of well-being at college.

"Worries about discrimination lead to alienation and can creep into your academic performance," said Mendoza-Denton. He said the findings make a strong case for boosting diversity on college campuses and increasing the opportunity for cross-race interactions.

Mendoza-Denton and co-researcher Elizabeth Page-Gould's investigation of cross-race friendships involved 144 undergraduates, both male and female. Researchers used a method known as the "fast friends" procedure that was first developed by psychologist Arthur Aron, of Stony Brook University, and consisted of three weekly one-hour meetings in a casual lab setting. To detect which participants held prejudices against other racial and ethnic groups, researchers administered the Implicit Association Test, which uses word associations to detect automatic biases.

During the first two sessions, participants asked one another questions written on cards and designed to foster openness and friendship. In the third session, participants played "Jenga," a game where players pull wooden blocks from a tower until it falls. The pastime is a well-known tension breaker.

During each session, the researchers measured changes in the students' hormonal responses to each other and asked them to keep a diary about their experiences. During the first friendship meeting, the cortisol levels of participants who had exhibited prejudices dropped when they interacted with members of their own race and rose during interactions with their cross-race peers. However, over the course of three friendship sessions, participants' cortisol levels decreased significantly when

interacting with students of another race. After completing the friendship sessions, students reported in their diaries that they had initiated more communications with members of other ethnic and racial groups.

"Thus, people who are least likely to make a cross-race friend are the very ones who benefit the most from such friendships," said Page-Gould, a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard University who co-authored the cross-race friendship study with Mendoza-Denton while at UC Berkeley.

Meanwhile, the Latino participants who were concerned about being discriminated against reported greater ease on campus after making a cross-race friend. The next test is to see whether cross-racial friendships last, Mendoza-Denton said.

"I love the idea of fostering friendships to make sure people don't just meet up for diversity get-togethers, but that they sustain these relationships," Mendoza-Denton said.

Provided by UC Berkeley

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