

# Nonverbal communication of race bias on TV influences viewers' own bias

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Subtle patterns of nonverbal behavior that appear on popular television programs influence racial bias among viewers, according to research from Tufts University to appear in the December 18, 2009, issue of the journal *Science*.

"Today, racial bias is often revealed via more subtle means than outright racial slurs," said first author Max Weisbuch, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow in the psychology department at the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts. "We wanted to know how frequently people were exposed to those subtle patterns of racial bias via TV and what influence such exposure might have. Sadly, we observed that nonverbal race bias is a typical pattern on scripted television shows. White characters are treated better across the board and this has an impact on viewers."

Black characters elicit especially negative nonverbal responses, such as [facial expressions](#) and body language, from other characters, and viewers exhibit more racial bias after exposure to such negative responses, according to the *Science* paper entitled "The Subtle Transmission of Race Bias via Televised Nonverbal Behavior."

The Tufts team studied the prevalence, subtlety and impact of nonverbal race bias in 11 popular weekly scripted television shows. They found that characters on the shows exhibited more negative nonverbal behavior toward black characters than to white characters of the same status. Exposure to "pro-white" (vs. "pro-black") nonverbal bias also increased viewers' race bias, as assessed with reaction-time and self-report

measures.

"Our findings suggest that hidden patterns of televised nonverbal behavior do measurably influence bias among viewers, even though viewers may be unable to consciously report observing a pattern of bias," said senior author Nalini Ambady, Ph.D., professor of psychology, Neubauer Faculty Fellow and director of the Interpersonal Perception and Communication Laboratory at Tufts University, where the research was done.

The *Science* study authors examined black and white characters whose status and positive attributes, such as likability and intelligence, could be roughly equated. For each of 30 characters, they edited brief clips to remove both the audio track and the featured black or white character, so it was possible to see how the "target" character was treated without actually seeing that character. Judges, who had not previously watched the shows, rated the extent to which the unseen characters were treated positively and liked by the other characters. Compared with black characters, white characters elicited significantly more favorable nonverbal responses. The studies did not examine why biases in the programs occur.

In addition, the Tufts researchers examined the effects of exposure to such nonverbal race bias on observers. Among their findings: Participants exposed to silent "pro-white" video clips later exhibited significantly faster reaction times to white-positive and black-negative pairings than to white-negative and black-positive pairings.

The researchers also discovered that observers found it difficult to recognize a pattern of bias across the pro-white or pro-black clips -- thus, the bias patterns were quite subtle.

According to the study, "Nonverbal behavior that communicates

favoritism of one race over another can be so subtle that even across a large number of exposures, perceivers are unable to consciously identify the nonverbal pattern. Nevertheless, exposure to nonverbal race bias can influence perceivers' race associations and self-reported racial attitudes."

Lead author Max Weisbuch is conducting follow-up research on the nature and implications of the effects described in the paper.

Provided by Tufts University

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