

Race and empathy matter on neural level

April 26 2010

Race matters on a neurological level when it comes to empathy for African-Americans in distress, according to a new Northwestern University study.

In a rare neuroscience look at [racial minorities](#), the study shows that African-Americans showed greater [empathy](#) for African-Americans facing adversity - in this case for victims of Hurricane Katrina - than Caucasians demonstrated for Caucasian-Americans in pain.

"We found that everybody reported empathy toward the Hurricane Katrina victims," said Joan Y. Chiao, assistant professor of psychology and author of the study. "But African-Americans additionally showed greater empathic response to other African-Americans in [emotional pain](#)."

The more African-Americans identified as African-American the more likely they were to show greater empathic preference for African-Americans, the study showed.

Initially, Chiao thought that both African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans would either show no pattern of in-group bias or both show some sort of preference.

The take-home point to Chiao: our ability to identify with another person dramatically changes how much we can feel the pain of another and how much we're willing to help them.

"It's just that feeling of that person is like me, or that person is similar to me," she said. "That experience can really lead to what we're calling 'extraordinary empathy and altruistic motivation.' It's empathy and altruistic motivation above and beyond what you would do for another human."

Using [functional magnetic resonance imaging](#), the study included an equal number of African-American and Caucasian-American study participants. They were shown pictures depicting either African-American or Caucasian-American individuals in a painful (i.e. in the midst of a natural disaster) or neutral (attending an outdoor picnic).

"We think this is really interesting because it suggests mechanisms by which we can enhance our empathy and altruistic motivation simply by finding ways in which we have commonality across individuals and across groups," Chiao said.

Chiao, who works at one of only two labs in the world dedicated to cultural and social neuroscience, is particularly interested in how social identities related to gender or race modulate the biological process underlying feeling and reason.

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Race and empathy matter on neural level (2010, April 26) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-04-empathy-neural.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--