

Racial bias clouds ability to feel others' pain

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When people witness or imagine the pain of another person, their nervous system responds in essentially the same way it would if they were feeling that pain themselves. Now, researchers reporting online on May 27th in *Current Biology*, a Cell Press publication, have new evidence to show that that kind of empathy is diminished when people (black or white) who hold racial biases see that pain is being inflicted on those of another race.

The good news is that people continue to respond with [empathy](#) when pain is inflicted on people who don't fit into any preconceived racial category—in this case, those who appear to have violet-colored skin.

"This is quite important because it suggests that humans tend to empathize by default unless prejudice is at play," said Salvatore Maria Aglioti of Sapienza Università di Roma.

In the study, conducted in Italy with people of Italian and African descent, participants were asked to watch and pay attention to short films depicting needles penetrating a person's hand or a Q-tip gently touching the same spot while their empathetic response was monitored. (The researchers specifically measured a feature known as sensorimotor contagion, as indicated by changes in the corticospinal [reactivity](#) assessed by transcranial [magnetic stimulation](#).) The results showed that people watching the painful episode responded in a way that was specific to the particular muscle they saw being stimulated when the film character was of the same race. But those of a different race didn't evoke that same sensorimotor response.

In further studies, the researchers tested individuals' responses to pain inflicted on models with violet hands. Under those circumstances, participants' empathetic responses were restored.

"This default reactivity of human beings implies empathy with the pain of strangers (i.e., a violet model) if no stereotype can be applied to them," said Alessio Avenanti of the Università di Bologna. "However, [racial bias](#) may suppress this empathic reactivity, leading to a dehumanized perception of others' experience."

The new findings expand on previous studies that have primarily looked at the neural underpinnings of racial bias based on facial expressions, thus emphasizing people's emotional reaction to the pain of others, the researchers said.

"To the best of our knowledge, our study is the only one that has tested the reactivity to hands and thus hints at the existence of general processes for separating the self from the others that may be largely independent from specific emotions," the researchers explained.

Based on the findings, the researchers suggest that methods designed to restore empathy for people of other races might also help in dealing with racial prejudice.

More information: Aglioti, Avenanti et al.: "Racial Bias Reduces Empathic Sensorimotor Resonance with Other-Race Pain." Publishing in *Current Biology* 20, 1-5, June 8, 2010. [DOI 10.1016/j.cub.2010.03.071](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2010.03.071)

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