

Study shows skin tone is not the major determinant of perceived racial identity

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(PhysOrg.com) -- How do we determine the racial background of a person that we have just met? The facial characteristics of various racial groups differ in many respects, ranging from the colour of their skin to the physical shape and size of their features.

Given the wide range of differences, it would seem logical that we consider a variety of those factors before determining someone's racial background. Yet amongst these many differences, studies have consistently shown that most people rate [skin tone](#) as the most influential factor when it comes to determining someone's race.

Two Macquarie University researchers, the Department of Psychology's

Dr Kevin Brooks and PhD student Scott Gwinn, decided to challenge the commonly held [perception](#) that skin tone is the primary determining factor when it comes to race.

Their study, published recently in the journal *Perception*, found that surprisingly, skin tone contributes very little to perceived race. Instead facial morphology - or the form and structure of the face - is the dominant cue in determining race.

Gwinn said the results of the study came as a surprise given conventional assumptions about how we determine race. They also call into question our whole labeling system used to classify a person's race.

"When you think about the racial labels 'Black' and 'White', they specifically refer to skin tone, but we found that skin tone hardly plays a role. It appears as though the structure of the face and the shape of features are the main determining factors used by people to determine race," he said.

Brooks and Gwinn's study used two groups of observers looking at a series of facial photos where a central face appeared lightened or darkened.

Half of the participants were asked for a rating of skin tone, while the other half were asked to say how typically African or European the central face appeared to be. Although the difference in perceived skin tone was clear in the ratings made by the first group, the second group showed that there was no difference in ratings of race.

"This was quite contradictory to what people have previously thought because we were able to show that the features and characteristics of someone's face have a greater impact on someone's perception of race than skin tone," Brooks said.

Provided by Macquarie University

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