

# Rebuffing racial insults: How culture shapes our behavior

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The color of our skin or where we come does matter when it comes to how we react to a racist insult. A new study has found that African American women are more likely than Asian American women to directly rebuff racist comments, a difference that may reflect deeply rooted cultural differences.

"Our work shows that racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are sources of diversity that may explain why different targets of racism behave the way they do," says Elizabeth Lee who conducted the research with co-lead author José Soto while at The Pennsylvania State University. Published online this week in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the study builds on past work that shows distinct differences across people from different cultures in conflict management, communication style, and emotional display rules.

In one experiment, the researchers recruited Asian women and Black women to talk to another college student online using Instant Messenger (IM). The conversation partner was actually a research assistant trained to make either a racist comment, like "Dating [Blacks/Asians] is for tools who let [Blacks/Asians] control them," or a parallel non-racist but still rude comment.

Participants then took part in what seemed like an unrelated taste test study to choose a candy for their conversation partner to eat. The participants could choose from an array of jellybeans that included good tasting (e.g. cherry, lemon) and bad tasting (e.g. earwax, dirt) jellybeans.

The researchers analyzed the conversations to measure how directly the participants responded to the offensive comment. They also took note of the jellybean flavors selected for the conversation partners as a measure of as an indirect way of responding to the conversation partner.

"The results of this study showed that African Americans were more likely to respond more directly when we looked at the transcripts of the IM conversations," says Lee who is now at ISCTE-Lisbon University Institute. "However, this difference in responding style goes away when you look at what kinds of jelly beans they gave the offending conversation partner." For the Asian women, the jelly bean selection served as an indirect method to respond to the racist comment – a sort of quiet revenge.

A second study had a different set of Black and Asian participants imagine having a conversation with a stranger who makes a racist comment. The researchers then asked them about their anticipated response to the comment and their goals for their imagined behavior. "The goals we were interested in were based on the norms that should be sanctioned by either African American or Asian American culture for these kinds of situations," Lee says. The results found that the Asian Americans were more likely to say they would not respond directly, driven by their desire to keep the peace in the interaction.

"Our findings are consistent with Black women's cultural heritage, which celebrates the past accomplishments of other Black confronters of discrimination, as well as Asian women's heritage, which advises finding expedient resolutions in the name of peaceful relations," the researchers write.

One important finding, Lee says is that "responding to racism in what seems like a passive or indirect way does not indicate being any less offended by the [racism](#) compared to responding behavior that is more

direct and verbal." She hopes that the work will spur researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and educators to consider the importance of racial background when making recommendations for how people should handle interpersonal discrimination.

**More information:** The paper "Bitter Reproach or Sweet Revenge: Cultural Differences in Response to Racism" was published online on April 11, 2012, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, a journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP).

[psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67212440292.abstract](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67212440292.abstract)

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