

# When they do not all look alike: Using identity to reduce own-race bias

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People often remark that people of a different race "all look alike." However, when we have trouble recognizing people from another race, it may actually have little to do with the other person's race. Instead, new research finds that that we can improve our memory of members of another race by identifying ourselves as part of the same group. Such identification could improve everything from race relations to eyewitness identification.

"One of the most robust [phenomena](#) in [social perception](#) is the finding that people are better at remembering people from their own race. This effect – called the own-race bias – is often interpreted as the consequence of perceptual expertise, whereby people spend more time with members of their own race and therefore have difficulty differentiating members of other races," says Jay Van Bavel of New York University, co-author of the new study published online last month in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#). "Instead, we show that people are better at differentiating members of their own race because they simply pay more attention to who is in their own group, regardless of their race."

In three experiments, Van Bavel and colleague William Cunningham of the University of Toronto tested the own-[race bias](#) by assigning people to an arbitrary group – for example the "Moons" or the "Suns" – that included both white and black members. Participants watched a series of faces and had a few minutes to learn all the members of both their own group as well as another group. Researchers then asked participants to

complete a short filler task to take their minds off the faces and then later administered a brief [memory test](#) to see if they could remember the people at the beginning of the study.

In the third experiment, there was a small twist: The researchers assigned people within each group the role of either a "soldier" or a "spy," telling them their goal was to serve the needs of the group. For [spies](#), the specific goal was to "remain loyal to the Moons (or Suns) but your ultimate goal will be to serve the needs of your group by infiltrating the Suns (or Moons)."

In all three experiments, race had no effect on how well participants remembered members of their group versus the other group. In general, people remembered members of their own group more than the other group. This was especially true of people who identified strongly with their group. "The people in our studies seem to care more about their group membership than race – even when the groups are completely trivial," Van Bavel says.

The "spies" were the exception to this pattern. People assigned to the role of spy had excellent memory for both in-group and out-group members. "In other words, spies paid more attention to out-group members because it was part of their group identity," Van Bavel says. "If you can give people the right motivation, they will pay attention to the out-group."

The research shows that there are ways for us to improve our memory of people in other groups. "If people find that racial biases are interfering with their interactions with others, they might considering trying to finding a common group membership that they share," Van Bavel says. "For example, they might see themselves as 'Americans.'"

The research also has implications for legal contexts, such as police

lineups and eyewitness testimony, he says. Recent research has found that approximately 36% of wrongful convictions are due to erroneous cross-race [eyewitness identification](#) in which Caucasian witnesses misidentify minority defendants.

**More information:** The paper, "A social identity approach to person memory: Group membership, collective identification, and social role shape attention and memory," was published online on August 20, 2012, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*  
[psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67212455829.abstract](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67212455829.abstract)

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