

Educated black men remembered as 'whiter'

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These are images of skin tone used in the study. Credit: Avi Ben-Zeev, Tara Dennehy, Robin Goodrich, Branden Kolarik, and Mark Geisler

A new study out today in *SAGE Open* finds that instead of breaking stereotypes, intellectually successful Black individuals may be susceptible to being remembered as "Whiter" and therefore 'exceptions to their race,' perpetuating cultural beliefs about race and intelligence. This new study shows that a Black man who is associated with being educated is remembered as being lighter in skin tone than he actually is, a phenomenon the study authors refer to as "skin tone memory bias."

"When a Black stereotypic expectancy is violated (herein, encountering an educated Black male), this culturally incompatible information is resolved by distorting this person's skin tone to be lighter in memory and therefore to be perceived as "Whiter," the main researcher, Avi Ben-Zeev, stated.

Researchers Avi Ben-Zeev, Tara Dennehy, Robin Goodrich, Branden Kolarik, and Mark Geisler conducted a two-part experiment with a total

of 160 university students. In the first experiment, participants were briefly exposed to one of two words subliminally: "ignorant" or "educated," followed immediately by a photograph of a Black man's face. Later, participants were shown seven photos that depicted the same face – the original as well as three with darker skin tones and three with lighter skin tones. They were asked to determine which of these seven photographs was identical to the one that they had originally seen.

The researchers found that participants who were primed subliminally with the word "educated" demonstrated significantly more memory errors attached to lighter skin tones (identifying even the lightest photo as being identical to the original) than those primed subliminally with the word "ignorant." This skin tone memory bias was replicated in experiment two.

"Uncovering a skin tone memory bias, such that an educated Black man becomes lighter in the mind's eye, has grave implications," Avi Ben-Zeev stated. "We already know from past researchers about the disconcerting tendency to harbor more negative attitudes about people with darker complexions (e.g., the darker a Black male is, the more aggressive he is perceived to be). A skin tone memory bias highlights how memory protects this 'darker is more negative' belief by distorting counter-stereotypic Black individuals' [skin tone](#) to appear lighter and perhaps to be perceived as less threatening."

More information: "When an 'Educated' Black Man Becomes Lighter in the Mind's Eye: Evidence for a Skin Tone Memory Bias," *SAGE Open*, 2014.

Provided by SAGE Publications

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