

A suspicious mind leads to a suspicious face

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Credit: Society for Personality and Social Psychology

In a series of studies, social psychology researchers show that Black participants who hold suspicious views of Whites visualize White faces, even smiling ones, as less trustworthy, less authentic and sometimes more hostile. The authors suggest there are some potential advantages to these biases, as well as drawbacks. The results are published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

"Anti-prejudice norms lead Whites to use positivity to conceal bias, sometimes in the absence of genuine interest in egalitarianism," says lead author Paige Lloyd (Miami University). "Thus, [people](#) of color may question whether positive gestures from Whites are authentic."

"Stigmatizing racism has curbed public discrimination but has also driven prejudice underground, creating social-cognitive challenges for people of color (POC)," write the study's authors. "Termed 'racism with a smile' or 'smiling racism,' legal scholarship illustrates that fears of appearing racist lead some Whites to mask [their discrimination] with positivity and effusiveness (Brooks, 1991)."

For the first set of studies, the researchers recruited 35 and 47 Black students, who viewed 400 pairs of blurry images of White faces and chose which one of the pair looked more like "the average White person." Participant selections were averaged together to create a visual representation of a White person. Selections were further averaged together for participants who score relatively high and relatively low on a suspicion scale - indexing participants' beliefs about whether Whites behave positively toward people of color for genuine (low suspicion) or self-presentational (high suspicion) reasons.

The authors then compared the visualizations of the average White person for Black participants who scored relatively high in suspicion to those who scored relatively low in suspicion by having naïve White evaluators rate the respective visualizations on trustworthiness and hostility.

The researchers found that Black participants who were relatively higher in suspicion held mental representations of (i.e., visualized) Whites as less trustworthy and sometimes more hostile than their low suspicion counterparts.

"Skepticism surrounding the authenticity of Whites' kindness may help suspicious people of color identify Whites who are concealing bias," says Lloyd, "but it may also sometimes get interracial interactions off on the wrong foot."

The researchers say that it is important that people think about contributions of majority and minority group members in interracial interactions.

Much of the existing work on intergroup relations has been through the lens of majority group members and has neglected minority perspectives," says Lloyd. "The results of the current work demonstrate the importance of recruiting minority group participants, acknowledging individual differences in motivations and concerns of minority group members, and attempting to understand the unique contribution of minority perspectives in the study of intergroup dynamics."

More information: E. Paige Lloyd et al, The Face of Suspicion, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550617699251](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617699251)

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