

Fighting prejudice through imitation

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New research shows that you can reduce racial prejudice simply by having a person mimic the movements of a member of the race he or she is prejudiced against. The method may work by activating brain mechanisms that contribute to feelings of empathy.

Normally, when we watch another person perform an action, our brain activity changes as we mentally simulate the other person. But the [brain activity](#) is less strong when we're watching people from other [racial groups](#), and is least strong among people who are prejudiced against the racial group.

Michael Inzlicht, professor in the department of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) and affiliate faculty at the School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Toronto, wondered if he could turn that around. If prejudice reduces [mental simulation](#), can physical simulation, or mimicry, reduce prejudice? It turns out that it can.

"We've shown that when people mimic others who belong to a different race than their own they tend to be less prejudiced toward that race," Inzlicht says.

Inzlicht, along with Jennifer N. Gutsell and Lisa Legault, also of UTSC, divided 63 white students into three groups and had them watch a video of a person repeatedly reaching for a bottle and taking a drink of water. One group watched a video with a black actor, and group members were instructed to mimic his movements. For comparison, another group

mimicked the movements of a white actor, and the third group simply watched a black actor. After the video, the group that had mimicked the black actor scored lower on a test of implicit prejudice against black people than either of the other two groups.

Previous research has shown that we experience "motor resonance" when we watch other people perform an action. For instance, in prior research, Inzlicht and Gutsell measured electroencephalographic (EEG) oscillations in the [motor cortex](#) that occurred while watching other people perform actions. The study showed that motor resonance was stronger in white people when they watched other white people, compared to watching blacks or South Asians.

Although the mechanism isn't certain, it's possible that physically mimicking someone activates the same brain mechanisms that are normally activated when someone watches a member of his or her own race, inspiring the missing feeling of empathy and reducing prejudice.

This study did not directly measure motor resonance. Instead, the researchers used a test that measured levels of implicit prejudice. During the test, an image of a black or white face is flashed on a screen for 75 milliseconds, followed by an image of an unfamiliar pictogram. Test-takers are asked whether they liked the pictogram or not. In fact, their answers really reveal their feelings about members of the other race.

Inzlicht thinks that the reduction in [prejudice](#) he saw in his study is likely only short-term, since it was based on mimicking movements for only 140 seconds. But he thinks mimicry over the longer term might make more permanent changes. He's planning on studying athletes to see if he can find any changes caused by coordinating movements with teammates of a different race.

The study will be published in the *Journal of Experimental Social*

Psychology and is available online.

Provided by University of Toronto Scarborough

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