

The Unhealthy Racist

Also published online as "Warning: Racism is Bad For Your Health"

(http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_racism_is_bad_for_your_health/)

By Elizabeth Page-Gould

When we think about the victims of racism, we typically think of the immediate *targets* of racial prejudice: Those who have suffered at the hand of discrimination and oppression. But new research has identified another, unlikely group of victims: the racists themselves.

In the urban metropolises of the United States and Canada, it is almost impossible to avoid talking to someone of another race. So imagine the toll it would take if every time you did, your body responded with an acute stress reaction: You experience a surge in stress hormones, and your heart pumps harder while your blood vessels constrict, inhibiting the flow of blood to your limbs and brain.

These types of bodily reactions are helpful in truly dangerous situations, but a number of recent studies have found that racially prejudiced people experience them even during benign social interactions with people of different races. This means that just navigating the supermarket, coffee shop, or modern workplace can be stressful for them. And if the racist person then has to go through this every single day, the repeated stress can become a chronic problem, which places them at heightened risk for disease in later life.

Harboring prejudice, it seems, may be bad for your health.

Challenge vs. threat

The human body is incredibly adaptive to stressful situations. But our nervous system reacts very differently to stressful situations we perceive as challenges than to those we see as threats. It's a distinction that, in the long run, could mean the difference between life and death for people with racial prejudices.

Challenges incite a sequence of physiological responses that send more blood to our muscles and brains, enhancing our physical and cognitive performance. Threats, on the other hand, set off a physiological response that restricts our blood flow and releases the hormone cortisol, which breaks down muscle tissue and halts digestive processes so that the body can quickly muster the energy it needs to confront the threat. Over time, these responses wear down muscles, including the heart, and damage the immune system.

In other words, facing challenges is good for you; facing threats is not. And whether you perceive interracial interactions as a challenge or a threat may be the key to thriving in a multicultural society.

In one study, Wendy Berry Mendes, Jim Blascovich, and their colleagues invited European-American men into the laboratory to engage in social interactions with African-American men or with men of the same race as themselves. The participants were hooked up to equipment that measured the responses of their autonomic nervous system while they played the game Boggle with their white or black partners.

When interacting with African-American partners, the white men tended to respond as to a physiological threat, marked by diminished blood pumped through the heart and constriction of the circulatory system.

However, European Americans who had positive experiences with African Americans in the past responded as though the game posed a challenge—increased blood pumped by the heart and dilation of the circulatory system.

This is not an isolated result. In a study with Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton and Linda Tropp, I randomly paired European-American and Latino participants into same-race and cross-race pairs and had them disclose personal information to each other. At the beginning and end of the social interaction, participants provided saliva samples so we could measure their cortisol responses to the social interactions.

Both Latino and European American participants who scored high on a measure of automatic prejudice—the degree to which you associate certain ethnic groups with the concepts of “bad” and “good”—had increases in cortisol during the friendly interaction with a cross-race partner, but produced less cortisol when interacting with a same-race partner. By comparison, participants who were low in prejudice were not stressed during either cross-race or same-race interactions.

In other words, prejudiced individuals perceived partners of a different race as a physical threat, even though they were in a safe laboratory setting and engaging in a task that was structured to build closeness between the participant pairs. This was true for both Latino and European-American participants who were prejudiced. Imagine these same individuals trying to negotiate a racially diverse street scene or meeting at work.

In another study, Wendy Berry Mendes and her colleagues invited European Americans to take a survey over the Internet, measuring their levels of automatic prejudice against African Americans. These white participants were then invited to a laboratory where either European Americans or African Americans evaluated participants, as if in a job interview.

Again, as in the study I did with my colleagues, cortisol spiked in the relatively racist participants—and at the same time, their bodies released low levels of DHEA-S, a hormone that helps repair tissue damage caused by the taxing “flight or fight” response. In contrast, the more egalitarian participants—those who scored low in automatic prejudice—responded to the interracial interaction with greater increases in DHEA-S than cortisol, which suggests that they saw the evaluation more as a healthy challenge than as a threat.

A healthy society?

The bottom line is clear: Harboring racist feelings in a multicultural society causes daily stress; this kind of stress can lead to chronic problems like cancer, hypertension, and Type II diabetes. But interracial interactions are not inherently stressful. Low-prejudice people show markedly different physiological responses during interracial interactions. In all three of these studies, people who had positive attitudes about people of other races responded to interracial interactions in ways that were happy, healthy, and adaptive.

These positive attitudes can be learned; prejudiced people are not doomed to be that way forever. In my own study with Latino and European-American participants, we randomly assigned racist participants—those who were measurably stressed out by simple cross-race conversations—to complete a series of friendship-building tasks over several weeks with people of a different race. Over the next several weeks, we watched cortisol levels diminish in prejudiced participants, a trend that lasted throughout the friendship meetings. Furthermore, in the 10 days following their final friendship meeting, prejudiced participants who had made a cross-race friend in the lab sought out more daily interracial interactions

afterward.

It's that simple: Building friendships with people of other races seems to eliminate unhealthy stress responses, so that each new interaction can be greeted as a challenge instead of a threat. In a racially diverse society, those who feel comfortable with people of other races are at an advantage over those who do not.

These results have profound implications for the way we design our neighborhoods and institutions; indeed, they suggest that race-mixing policies like affirmative action might be just as good for white people as for people of color. The future health of racist people is not set in stone. If they're willing to take the first step and reach out to people of other groups in a friendly way, they may learn to thrive in a society that is increasingly diverse.

Elizabeth Page-Gould, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Her essay is featured in the new Greater Good anthology, [Are We Born Racist? New Insights from Neuroscience and Positive Psychology](#), published by Beacon Press.

© 2010 Greater Good All rights reserved.

View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/147814/>