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RACE AND PSYCHOLOGY

'Those people' can't tell you apart, either

Researchers say it is harder to differentiate between strangers of another race than one's own. But there's a solution.

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In a recent episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano dreamed that he'd been slapped by a Buddhist monk who mistook him for another white man who'd swindled him.

''All Caucasians look alike,'' explained the unapologetic monk.

They often do, it turns out, at least to people who aren't Caucasian. For that matter, blacks often look alike to whites and Hispanics to Asians. It's not that people of any one race are harder to distinguish; researchers say that individual features vary equally among races. Rather, it's that people have problems telling people from another group apart.

This so-called cross-race effect -- something of a misnomer because the phenomenon includes ethnic, cultural and regional groups as well as racial ones -- can cause trouble in an increasingly globalized world. For example:

DANGEROUS MISTAKES

• U.S. forces in Iraq sometimes have mistakenly admitted foreign insurgents because they couldn't tell Saudis or Egyptians from Iraqis, according to Steve Casteel, a U.S. security consultant who until recently advised Iraq's interior ministry, which handles domestic security. Iraqi police who later picked up foreign fighters would discover that the foreign insurgents had convinced U.S. screeners that they were Iraqis.

• U.S. drug agents sometimes can't tell Colombian leaders of smuggling groups from the Peruvian and Bolivian peasants who work for them, said Casteel, a vice president at Vance International, a worldwide security firm based in Oakton, Va. An agent's ignorance can be dangerous, he continued, because Colombian drug bosses are more likely to be armed and violent.

• The Innocence Project, a New York nonprofit legal clinic that tracks life imprisonment convictions that are overturned by DNA evidence, found that white eyewitnesses misidentified innocent blacks 44 percent of the time. That's nearly twice as often as they misidentified innocent whites.

Misidentifications aren't due to racism, however, said Roy Malpass, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at El Paso who's published widely on the cross-race effect. ''People make about 50 percent more errors,'' he said, whenever they're asked to remember other-race faces.

'US' AND `THEM'

Malpass bases his estimate on experiments in which researchers asked subjects to study equal numbers of faces from their race and from a different race. After some time passed, the subjects looked at double the number of faces they'd seen before -- half of them seen in the earlier trial and half introduced for the first time -- and identified those they thought they'd seen before. They all did much better with their own race.

Difficulty telling ''them'' apart decreases if it's someone you need to know, such as your boss or best friend, according to Chris Meissner, who's studying the effect through a National Science Foundation grant at the University of Texas at El Paso.

LIVING TOGETHER HELPS

Living alongside other races also helps, which is why racism -- and its built-in isolation from other races -- can exacerbate the effect, he says. Meissner says the same goes for towns, workplaces and schools that have few minorities or are dominated by one race.

Practice and motivation -- such as courting foreign business or someone of another race -- can overcome the cross-race effect to a degree. ''But you are much less rapid and accurate,'' said Scania de Schonen, a neuroscientist at the University Rene Descartes in Paris who's studied the cross-race effect in babies, adoptees and immigrants.

LEARNED RECOGNITION

Humans develop their recognition skills in infancy, honing them on the faces they see most often, Schonen said, and those are mostly of their own race. Much of that skill building is done by the time they're 3, she believes; nearly all by the time they're 9.

Among her findings is that young Koreans adopted by European Caucasians, if they're adopted before age 9, identify people of their adoptive parents' race more easily than their own. Koreans who moved to France in their 20s did the opposite.

''After some years it seems that you cannot adapt anymore,'' Schonen said.

Malpass theorizes that the brain becomes less malleable in the area responsible for recognition and that people try to remember faces by focusing on the physical traits that vary in their own race -- hair and eye color and noses among Caucasians, for example.

Because hair and eye color don't vary as much in Asians, many Caucasians are stymied. Or they fix on traits that are different from those of most Caucasians, such as eye folds, which doesn't help them tell most Asians apart.

''We're looking for things that distinguish them for us,'' said Malpass, ``but not the things that distinguish them from each other.''