Psychology Today Here To Help

Limits to the Lineup: ***Why we're twice as likely to misidentify a face of another race.***
By:Michael Salfino

People often joke that members of another race "all look alike." Do they?

"We're 1.5 times more likely to misidentify someone from another race and 1.4 times more likely to correctly identify someone from our own," says Christian Meissner, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

Psychologists saw evidence for this "cross-race effect" in the recent Duke University lacrosse scandal. Three white team members were indicted on rape charges based largely on photographic lineups, but during one session, the black accuser admitted that all the team members looked the same.

Does seeing other-race faces as homogenized make us all closet racists? Not according to Arizona State University's Josh Ackerman. "The relationships that mattered most to us from an evolutionary standpoint occurred between individuals within the same cultural and ethnic in-groups," the psychologist says. "Contacts with other races have tended to be at the group—as opposed to individual—level."

If a face contorts in anger, though, the cross-race effect disappears, Ackerman's research says. Threatening faces, especially on people of other races, are more readily burned into your brain. Unfortunately, victims are often too busy tracking weapons and figuring out an escape to remember their attackers.

Consequences of misidentification are dire. About 75 percent of prisoners exonerated by DNA testing were convicted primarily on eyewitness ID. And cross-racial eyewitnesses are estimated to outnumber intraracial ones by 100 percent. According to UTEP professor Roy Malpass, who runs an eyewitness research lab, "With very few exceptions, cases where cross-race identification is the single bit of evidence ought not to be prosecuted."

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