

# The face of chauvinism: How prejudice expectations shape perceptions of facial affect <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Are individuals who chronically expect to be treated prejudicially biased toward perceiving rejecting emotions in the faces of out-group others? In two studies, participants watched a series of computer-generated movies showing animated faces morphing from expressions of rejection (i.e., contempt and anger) to acceptance, and indicated when the initial expression of rejection changed. We also assessed stigma consciousness. Study 1 tested the connection between gender-based stigma consciousness and perceptions of contempt in male vs. female faces among female participants. Study 2 examined this connection for both men and women and for perceptions of contempt as well as anger. Results show that prejudice expectations lead individuals to interpret out-group faces as more rejecting than in-group faces, but only for female perceivers, and not for males. Further, our results suggest that prejudice expectations affect perceptions of contempt, but not anger. These results are discussed in relation to intergroup relations and emotion.

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*I had reached the habit of expecting color prejudice so universally, that I found it even when it was not there—  
DuBois (1944/1991, p. 113).*

What are the effects of hearing that your group is just not good enough, day after day, year after year? How do you perceive the world, and those in it, after being hammered over the head with negative stereotypes about your group? As the quote by DuBois above indicates, one possi-

ble outcome is to start expecting prejudice universally, to anticipate being judged on the basis of your group and not by the content of your character. That is, one might develop a script for intergroup rejection, in which one worries about being socially devalued and becomes vigilant for cues communicating this rejection. And there may be no better place to look for these cues than the face.

The face is of central importance to social interaction and can be thought of as *the* medium of emotional expression (Ekman & Friesen, 1969; Izard, 1971). It is here that we look to see if we are being accepted or rejected, welcomed or turned away, and is usually the focus of our attention when interacting with others. People have the ability to read faces and decode non-verbal facial expressions, especially when the expressions are intense, unambiguous, and overt (Ekman, 2003). We get into more trouble, however, when the expressions are subtle and ambiguous. Understanding how members of stigmatized groups interpret ambiguous facial displays is the focus of the present research. We ask if individuals who chronically

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expect to be treated prejudicially show a bias in the perception of facial affect given off by out-group members.

### Prejudice expectations

Targets of prejudice are aware of their group's stigmatized social identity, including the awareness that their group has lower status, compares unfavorably to other groups, and is negatively stereotyped (Crocker & Major, 1989; Frey & Tropp, 2006; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; Vorauer, Main, & O'Connell, 1998). Many African Americans, for example, recognize that others hold negative beliefs about their group's academic ability and penchant for aggressive behavior (Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002). This awareness can lead to the expectation of being the target of prejudice and discrimination and to the formation of a script for prejudicial treatment. Borrowing from the relational schema literature (e.g., Baldwin, 1992), we define prejudice expectations as working models of intergroup interactions that function as cognitive maps to help people navigate their social worlds. Although a thorough discussion is beyond the scope of the current treatment, these cognitive structures are hypothesized to include images of self and other, along with a script for an expected pattern of rejection during intergroup interactions. Prejudice expectations lead people to become vigilant and on guard for evidence of personal discrimination, and can cause individuals to feel at risk for social devaluation, exclusion, and biased treatment (Major & O'Brien, 2005; Steele et al., 2002).

When operating with a prejudice expectation, people survey their surroundings to determine whether they are in a potentially threatening environment (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000) and become sensitive to cues communicating that their group's stigmatized social status may be rejected (Kaiser, Vick, & Major, 2006). When people are uncertain of their standing and watchful for stigma-relevant cues, they may underperform on academic tasks (Steele & Aronson, 1995), attribute negative feedback to prejudice (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002), and react negatively during intergroup interactions (Pinel, 2002).

### Individual differences

Importantly, people differ in the extent to which they hold prejudice expectations and these differences have important outcomes for intergroup behavior, such as intergroup emotions, institutional trust, cross-group friendships, and academic performance (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004; Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002; Pinel, 2002; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2005). Recent work suggests that individual differences in prejudice expectations, such as stigma consciousness or rejection sensitivity, can also activate a biologically based defensive motivation system that orients individuals towards negative stimuli in order to react to them appropriately (Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert,

1990). Kaiser et al. (2006), for example, found evidence suggesting that women who were high in stigma consciousness paid more attention to subliminally presented social-identity threatening cues. This increased pre-conscious attention, however, was only responsive to social-identity threatening cues; general negative or neutral cues did not elicit the same response. Similarly, Downey and colleagues showed that individuals who were high in personal rejection-sensitivity reacted to rejection-relevant cues with an augmented startle eye-blink response—a marker of the activation of the defensive motivation system—suggesting that they pay close attention to rejection cues and readily perceive rejection in other people's behavior (Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004). There is evidence then, that people who hold prejudice expectations pay extra close attention, perhaps even pre-conscious attention, to the cues that signal group-based rejection.

But can prejudice expectations affect visual perception? Can it, for example, affect the way a woman perceives a man's facial display of emotion? We predict that among a socially devalued group (women), prejudice expectations would be associated with a tendency to see rejecting emotions in the faces of out-group members (men) but not in-group members (women).

### Emotions as revealed by the face

Although no research has explored this hypothesis directly, several research traditions support our line of reasoning. Since the *New Look* in psychology, researchers have repeatedly illustrated how psychological states, individual differences, and specific situations can shape perception. This was demonstrated most famously by Bruner and Goodman (1947) who showed that a child's values and needs could affect his or her estimates of the size of various coins. Recently, researchers have shown that the perception of faces and facial affect can also be affected by these states and traits. The emotions we feel, for example, can determine how long we see similar emotions last on someone else's face. Using a novel method, Niedenthal, Halberstadt, Margolin, and Innes-Ker (2000) had participants watch a short movie showing a person's face expressing a specific emotion (e.g., happiness) that gradually changed to a second emotion (e.g., sadness). Participants—who were induced to feel specific emotions—were asked to indicate when the initial expression dissipated. Results showed that emotion congruent expressions (e.g., perceiving happiness after being induced with happiness) were perceived to last longer than emotion incongruent expressions (e.g., perceiving sadness after being induced with happiness). This suggests that specific emotional states can enhance the perceptual processing of similar emotions in others.

Using the same methodology, Hugenberg and Bodenhausen (2003) showed that White participants who were high in implicit racial prejudice perceived anger displayed by a Black face to last longer than White participants who were low in implicit prejudice. This suggests that

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