What You Wear Can Influence How People Perceive Your Race

By Christina Tsuei

What you wear can influence how others view you — specifically what they perceive your race to be, a new study finds.

The findings show how stereotypes and prejudices play a powerful role in how we mentally categorize people, says Jon Freeman, lead author of the study and a doctoral candidate in psychology at Tufts University.

The researchers, a group of psychologists and sociologists from Tufts, Stanford University and University of California, Irvine, asked study participants to determine the race of computerized faces wearing high-status attire (a business suit) or low-status attire (a janitor’s jumpsuit). Faces viewed in high-status attire were more likely to be seen as white and faces viewed in low-status attire were likely to be seen as black.

The study appears in the journal PLoS One.

Stereotypes were even more influential when a person’s race was visually ambiguous, Freeman tells the Health Blog. When the race isn’t readily apparent, “the biases we already hold are going to have a particularly strong role in shaping perception,” he says.

Using a technique that tracked the movements of a computer mouse, the researchers recorded the trajectory of participants’ hand movements as they selected a racial category on a computer screen. When viewing racially ambiguous faces, they found participants were initially drawn to the race stereotypically associated with the style of dress even if they ultimately chose the opposite. So even if a participant decided a person wearing a business suit was black, the trajectory of the mouse revealed he or she was first drawn to the “white” option.

“Initially categorizing someone as white or black is often believed to be a straightforward, snap judgment, based simply on a person’s facial features like skin color,” Freeman says. “Our findings show that our initial categorizations of race are highly malleable,” affected by context and stereotypes.

That our perception of race can be molded by status cues may have implications for subsequent social interactions, the study reports.
Freeman says the research indicates populations including more mixed-race people may be more susceptible to these kinds of stereotypes and social consequences.

"Hopefully with that knowledge and perhaps public awareness we might make some small steps in reducing racism and prejudice," he says.

Here's a WSJ video about the study: