

Xenophobia, for men only

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Very few people fear dandelions. Or even dangerous things - like Hummers. We may object to outsized automobiles on principle, but the mere sight of them doesn't make us tremble and sweat and run away. On the other hand, even toddlers show an automatic and powerful fear of snakes, including harmless ones.

That's because of eons of evolution among both dangerous and benign things. There is probably no snake phobia programmed into our genetic code, but we do have an evolved mental readiness to be fearful of certain things in our world. Does this cognitive readiness influence our relationships with other people? Psychologists have been studying this question, and the preliminary answer is yes. In a new study, Michigan State psychologist Carlos David Navarrete used mild shocks to make black and white men and women fearful other black and white men and women. That is, white men were conditioned to be fearful of black men and white men as well as black women and white women, and so forth with the others. Then Navarrete observed to see if these fears lasted or not.

The findings, reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, were intriguing and unexpected. It's known that people are more fearful of "out-groups" - that is, people who are different from them, and this fear of "the other" has been clearly demonstrated with race. But Navarrete found that volunteers' most persistent fears were reserved for men - that is, male members of the out-group. So white men and women feared black men, and black men and women feared white men; all the other lab-induced fears,

including any conditioned fear of women diminished.

Navarrete ran a number of other tests to clarify the results. He tested for blatant racism (Example: "Generally, blacks are not as smart as whites") and for more subtle, unconscious racism. He also gathered histories of the volunteers' interracial contact- friendships, colleagues, romantic involvements. It was only these histories that mattered: Those with close relationships outside their own race had less persistent fears than did those with little interracial experience.

Why would gender influence these ingrained fears as much as race? It may be that men were more often the aggressors over evolutionary time, so that male faces became a potent cue for danger. So xenophobia is not an equal-opportunity emotion.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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