

Virtually lowering a person's height 'heightens' feelings of mistrust

29 January 2014

(Medical Xpress)—A study funded by the Medical Research Council shows that, in those who are prone to having 'mistrustful thoughts', experiencing a social situation from a lower height can make people feel more inferior and excessively mistrustful.

Previous studies have indicated that height is a marker of social status, and a study published online today in *Psychiatry Research* has demonstrated that making a person's height lower than it actually is can make them feel worse about themselves and more fearful that others are trying to harm them. The experiment provides a demonstration of how low self-esteem can lead to the occurrence of paranoid thinking and will inform further studies looking to increase levels of confidence and reduce excessive mistrust. The findings will be used to develop more effective psychological treatment for severe [paranoia](#), a key [mental health problem](#).

The study, led by Professor Daniel Freeman at the University of Oxford, tested 60 adult women from the general population who were prone to having 'mistrustful thoughts'. The participants experienced an underground tube ride virtual reality simulation. They experienced the same 'journey' twice, with the only difference being a reduction in height of about a head (25cm). In both instances, the other virtual passengers were programmed to be 'neutral', and not a cause of fear in the participants.

While most people did not consciously register the height difference, there was an increase in the number of people who reported [negative feelings](#), such as being incompetent, unlikeable, and inferior, in the lower height phase of the experiment. These negative thoughts translated into an increase in paranoia towards the other passengers. The participants were more likely to think that someone in the carriage was staring in order to upset them, had bad intentions towards them, or were trying to make them distressed.

Professor Daniel Freeman, an MRC Senior Clinical Fellow at the University of Oxford, said:

"Being tall is associated with greater career and relationship success. Height is taken to convey authority, and we feel taller when we feel more powerful. It is little wonder then that men and women tend to over-report their height. In this study we reduced people's height, which led to a striking consequence: people felt inferior and this caused them to feel overly mistrustful. This all happened in a [virtual reality simulation](#) but we know that people behave in VR as they do in real life.

"It provides a key insight into paranoia, showing that people's excessive mistrust of others directly builds upon their own negative feelings about themselves. The important treatment implication for severe paranoia that we can take from this study is that if we help people to feel more self-confident then they will be less mistrustful. This prediction is exactly what we are testing in the next phase of our work, a new randomised controlled clinical trial."

"At any one time, one in six people in the UK are affected by mental illness. Funding research that help improves understanding of what causes disrupted thought patterns is important if we're to develop interventions that work further down the road. For people whose lives are affected by paranoid thinking, this study provides useful insights on the role of [height](#) and how this can influence a person's sense of mistrust."

Provided by Medical Research Council

APA citation: Virtually lowering a person's height 'heightens' feelings of mistrust (2014, January 29) retrieved 13 July 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-virtually-lowering-persons-height-heightens.html>

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