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RESEARCH, NEWS AND LIFE AT U OF T SCARBOROUGH

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Visual artist wins Governor General's Award

Prejudice: Fit for survival or ripe for extinction?

PHOTO: KEN JONES

Fit for survival or ripe for extinction? The theory of natural selection holds true for a host of human traits, even racism might die out as a nonadaptive trait in a global society.

However, psychology professor Michael Inzlicht isn't willing to wait that long.

"Racism has a long evolution," says Inzlicht, "likely borne out of our cognitive habit of categorizing people and things for understanding and learning. As well, the hunter-gatherers of our ancestral past tended to stick together to protect themselves from outside groups." Inzlicht adds, "People do differ as a result of their culture, their gender and their sexual orientations. But presuming that a person or a group is inferior or superior, based on no evidence, and acting on that prejudice, is quite likely maladaptive in the contemporary world."

"Michael Inzlicht's research on the psychology of prejudice touches on issues that we as a society grapple with every day."

For those who think that prejudice, including racism, has died out in countries perceived as egalitarian, such as Canada, Inzlicht responds that prejudice is alive and well but has largely changed its form, perhaps reflecting the strength of its evolutionary roots. Inzlicht focuses on the psychology of prejudice, and the role of the human brain's mirror neurons — a system of neurons (the most basic cells in the brain) — that is active both when an individual acts and when that individual observes that same action in others. Inzlicht's research on this and other subjects has earned him various prestigious grants and fellowships.



available in Canada, the U.K., Australia, India and Africa: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.

Overt prejudice, says the U of T Scarborough professor, may be anonymously displayed or publicly denied, since it is now quite socially unacceptable in many parts of the world.

Much of the psychologist's own research to date, including his PhD thesis at Rhode Island's Brown University, has been in the area of the effects of negative gender stereotypes on women. Inzlicht has looked at the

begun an experiment in which people will watch videotapes of other people performing simple actions.

The goal is to see if the brain's "mirror-neuron" system will activate when people watch members of their "in" group — individuals who look like them, versus members of their "out" group — people unlike them. Mirror-neuron-system theory is quite new in psychology. Such neurons are thought to be involved in feelings of empathy, and to be active when imitating the actions of another. The hypothesis of Inzlicht and his research

effects on women's intellectual performance in environments where they are in the minority and may be expected to underperform when compared to men, in

"Michael Inzlicht's research on the psychology of prejudice and the way the human brain's mirror neuron system works is breaking new ground and generating a lot of excitement and attention," says Prof. John Bassili, chair of the department of psychology at U of T Scarborough. "His work has implications not just in psychological circles, but also touches on issues that we as a society grapple with every day."

Inzlicht's own study of the psychology of prejudice originates from his time as a young student in Montreal. His experience of growing up Jewish revealed to him the effects of unrestrained prejudice. Meanwhile, he was inspired by such towering figures as Martin Luther King Jr. In the view of Inzlicht and several Western researchers, explicit racism and other forms of blatant prejudice are much less common today. In earlier decades, such racism was explicit, forcing blacks to sit at the back of the bus, or segregating people with such signs as "Christians only."

Blatant racism has since mutated into several new forms, according to Inzlicht. One that is most troubling, because it is most difficult to decode and therefore counter, is "implicit racism." Implicit racism or prejudice refers to attitudes that can be held by even the most consciously egalitarian people, he says, since the attitudes are ingrained in the unconscious and may derive from early teachings, associations or socio-cultural influences, like media representations of individuals based on their group affiliation.

"One obstacle in developing the theory," says Inzlicht, "is that implicit racism is very difficult to measure in the lab, because people may not be aware of these attitudes or, if they are, they may want to hide them." A study from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom has identified stigmatized groups' sensitivity to implicit prejudice, while three U.S. researchers developed a five-minute self-test for implicit racism in 1998, under the banner Project Implicit.™ The test is now

team is that there will be less mirror-neuron activity when people watch out-group faces rather than in-group faces, meaning people are hard wired to empathize more with their in group.

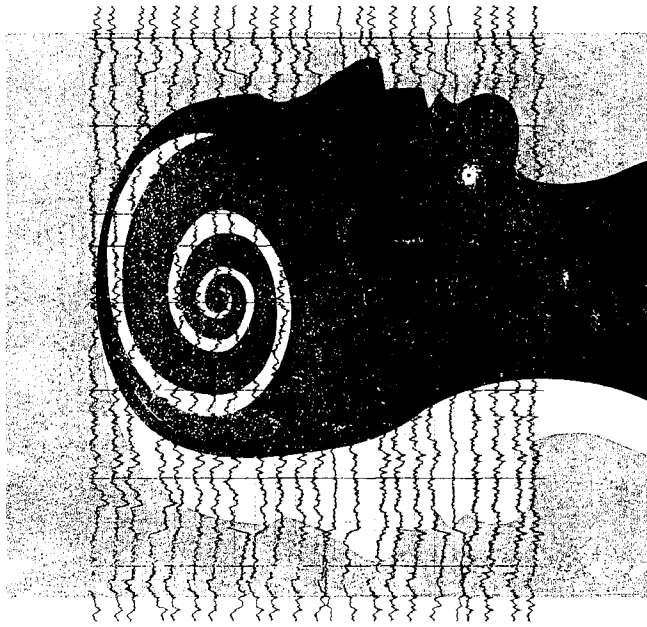
Until the results of studies like these are known, Inzlicht is also prepared to explore the question of implicit racism in the arena of public opinion. Having recently contributed to a *Globe and Mail* article on the subject, Inzlicht then participated in the newspaper's online question-and-answer session with readers. Some disagreed vehemently with the professor's thesis, that otherwise liberal- and egalitarian-minded people — or, in fact, most people — might be implicitly racist or prejudiced in some way without being aware of it.

Ultimately, it will require a number of cognitive and sociocultural studies and techniques to actually eradicate prejudice. Still, in Inzlicht's view, it is not an intractable problem. He says that all nations display some prejudice, but often against different groups than other countries do. For example, women who work in mathematics and sciences in Eastern Europe do not face the same negative stereotypes as their counterparts in the West. These differences in the way some groups perceive others suggests to him both the difficulty of changing attitudes and a ray of hope.

"If environmental influences affect how we perceive others and how we behave — and they do — environment can change the very expression of our genes." The origin of our species in stereotypical thinking does not have to predict our future.

For the time being, though, for those willing to explore their own psyches, Project Implicit™ is available. Its validity is questioned by some academics and praised by others. Inzlicht advises that, if you log on, that you do so with conscious awareness, in an open-minded and candid way, in case you're not happy with what you find out about yourself.

Does implicit racism actually exist and, if so, can the brain's ancient hard wiring be changed? Attempting to answer the question of whether we can measure and manipulate unconscious racist responses, Inzlicht has



math and science, for example. In his studies, he found that same-sex environments for women studying math and engineering improved performance. By contrast, women in the minority tended to internalize negative stereotypes about women and math and performed accordingly. Inzlicht believes this type of stigmatization, often nonverbal, and the resulting internalized negative stereotype about oneself may provide clues to implicit prejudice.

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— by Lisa Boyes