

## PSYCHOLOGY » ASSESSING FACE VALUE

## He looks like a sexist? Well, maybe that's what you expect

BY ANNE MCILROY

A woman takes her car to a garage and, as she describes the strange ping-pong coming from the engine, the mechanic starts to smirk.

Does she think it's because he knows what the problem is – or because he's sneering at her? The answer may depend on whether she thinks he's a sexist.

People who expect to be discriminated against can read contempt into what is really an ambiguous facial expression, University of Toronto psychologist Michael Inzlicht says. In other words, how we read people's faces may be as much about us as them.

In a paper published this week in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Dr. Inzlicht and his colleagues describe how they asked 37 female university students to watch six 15-second computer-generated movies in which the facial expressions of a man or a woman morphed from contempt to happiness. Each time they spotted a shift in mood, the participants had to press a button.

Before the experiment, all



**Female university students were asked to press a button when they spotted the change in mood from contempt to happiness in the facial expressions of men and women.**

IMAGES COURTESY OF PSYCHOLOGIST MICHAEL INZLICHT

the women took a questionnaire about sexism in their lives. They were asked if they agreed – on a scale of zero to six – with such statements as “Most men have a lot more sexist thoughts than they actually express” or “Most people do not judge people on the basis of gender.”

The women who expected chauvinistic behaviour from men – about a third of the group – were much slower to spot the changes in facial expression in the male faces; they saw contempt for half a second to a full second longer.

There was no difference between the two groups when

they were looking at female faces.

Although the experiment dealt with sexism, Dr. Inzlicht believes the findings apply as well to people who expect to experience discrimination based on their race or religion.

He is leery of blaming the victims of discrimination, but

he says how people expect to be treated can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Say you expect to be stereotyped and you encounter someone with an ambiguous expression. “So you react. Maybe you are a little bit angry. ... You don't like them because you think they don't like you.” The other person sees your anger and reciprocates. “So in a sense, you have created the reaction you expected.”

But it is hard to tell people not to trust their gut instincts, Dr. Inzlicht says. “The first step is becoming aware.”

The phenomenon does more than colour social encounters. There is growing evidence that people who expect to experience prejudice are more likely to view the world with mistrust and do worse academically, he says.

But it isn't always a bad thing to be prepared for sexism or racism. Some studies suggest that people who are not surprised by prejudice suffer less when they encounter it, Dr. Inzlicht says. “You have the tools to deal with it when it does happen.”

» Anne McIlroy is *The Globe and Mail's* science writer.