



Exposure to prejudice may cause aggression, overeating

The Canadian Press

Updated: Wed. Aug. 11 2010 9:22 AM ET

TORONTO — Prejudice can have lingering effects, causing more aggression, overeating and an inability to focus in those who are targeted, a study indicates.

The work, a series of several experiments, was done at the University of Toronto by associate professor of psychology Michael Inzlicht and graduate student Sonia Kang.

It builds on years of research showing that people don't perform well in situations where they're subjected to negative stereotyping.

"Even if you've left the workplace that's a threatening workplace because your boss makes derogatory remarks about your race, once you leave that workplace and go home, you may be less able to do the kinds of things you want to do," Inzlicht said in an interview Tuesday.

"Dealing with prejudice has lingering effects later on. So that could be something like, maybe driving home you're more likely to experience road rage. Maybe when you get home, and let's say you're on a diet, you're less likely to stick to your diet. Or maybe your kids are acting up and you're more likely to react in anger or frustration."

The findings are published this month in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In one of the experiments, female students were brought into a lab and given a rigorous test to determine their ability in math, while subjected to subtle stereotypes about women's math skills. Another group wrote the same test, but was given coping strategies and support to deal with the stress of writing the test. Everyone was given low scores and negative feedback.

Later, they were asked to take part in a series of tasks to determine their levels of aggression. In the followup tasks, women who felt discriminated against showed more hostility than those who'd been given the coping strategies.

The food consumption portion involved asking test subjects to take part in a taste test of ice cream, piled up in three scoops for each of three flavours.

"They can do the task by just having one bite of ice cream per flavour, or they can have all nine scoops if they really want to," Inzlicht explained.

"What we find is those women who had just previously coped with negative stereotypes about their group, they were more likely to eat more ice cream ... compared to those women who were not in the same type of threatening situation."

Another experiment measured brain activity and the ability to pay attention. The women who felt they were exposed to negative stereotypes were less likely to remain focused, Inzlicht said.

He said people exposed to situations where their group may be a target of prejudice can do better when they're given a coping strategy.

"All we do is we tell people, 'listen, we would like you to enter the situation looking at it objectively and neutrally. Don't take what goes on in the situation personally. So in a way, detach yourself from the situation.'"

"These simple instructions help people cope with the threatening situation, and as a result they don't show the same type of spillover effects later on."

This puts the burden on the person who's targeted by stereotypes, he acknowledged. The other message of the study would be to change stereotypes altogether.

"Definitely attitudes have changed over the last 30-40 years. So it's not an impossible task, just a difficult one."

© 2010 **CTVglobemedia** All Rights Reserved.