

Victims of stereotyping prone to over-eating, making bad decisions: Research

BY MISTY HARRIS, POSTMEDIA NEWS AUGUST 11, 2010



Discrimination could be making you fat. Over-eating is just one of a laundry list of negative effects linked to having recently experienced prejudice or exposure to an environment in which stereotyping was ambient — whether at a job site, a street corner or an airport-security checkpoint.

Photograph by: Getty Images, National Post

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Other effects observed by Canadian researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, include increased hostility, difficulty focusing on tasks and irrational decision-making.

"It's long been known that people who are stereotyped or targets of prejudice will, of course, experience ill-effects in those moments," says Michael Inzlicht, associate professor of psychology at the University of Toronto Scarborough. "But what we found is that it can affect your situation even after you've left the threatening environment."

In multiple experiments in which different kinds of stereotyping were invoked in a variety of ways, Inzlicht and co-author Sonia Kang consistently found the negative effects of discrimination "spill over" to non-stereotyped domains that require self-control.

People recently exposed to prejudice had greater trouble making rational decisions, were more aggressive, overindulged in unhealthy foods and underperformed on cognitive tests compared to those in a control group.

"When people suppress their emotions in the moment, trying to push (the discrimination) out of their minds, that kind of coping is really cognitively taxing," says Inzlicht.

"Let's say you're in a workplace with a really prejudiced boss and it takes all your energy not to just snap and get angry, or even fired. By the time you go home, you're more likely to deal inappropriately with your children, less likely to stick to your diet, less likely to follow an exercise regimen, and will have less ability to do the things you want to do."

Researchers say there are vast implications for anyone working in an environment in which stereotyping, or feelings that one might be stereotyped, creates stress. For example, a lone female firefighter on a crew full of males.

Inzlicht also notes that visual minorities who routinely encounter both subtle and aggressive forms of discrimination stand to see their quality of life negatively affected, with such tasks as getting out of bed when the alarm clock sounds or choosing a salad over fries — "small victories" most people take for granted — likely to be less frequent.

Indeed, Nick Noorani, founding publisher of Canadian Immigrant, says he's heard things in his 12 years as a citizen that he still can't shake.

"It's the small slights, the small comments, that never leave you," says Noorani, an Indian who came to Canada via Dubai in 1998. "Canadians are the most welcoming, friendliest and embracing people. But you will have some jackasses."

Future research will examine a broader range of domains, such as whether the spillover effect is linked to gambling risks or greater financial waste, as well as the potential for certain negative behaviours to rub off on family members.

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