

## WHY WE INSTINCTIVELY REJECT IMMIGRANTS AND HOW WE CAN OVERCOME SUCH BIAS

I begin with a disconcerting fact: **The human brain is biologically hard-wired to reject immigrants.** However, there is good news - **we can overcome this bias.**

You walk into a subway train and see a person sitting at one end of the carriage. This person is clearly an immigrant - a foreigner of a race unfamiliar to you. He (or she) appears harmless, but his mannerisms (and possibly accent if he is speaking) are different. Chances are, you instinctively sit away from this person. Sound familiar?

This happens because of the way our brains are wired. When we see a person of an unfamiliar race, the amygdala in our brain (walnut-sized components that arouse fear and anxiety) are triggered, even before our consciousness can interpret the situation. This is nature's way of protecting us from harm, by sensing subconscious hints of 'danger' to trigger lightning-fast reflexes. The eye perceives, the amygdala activates, and this triggers a split-second reaction to draw away from the unfamiliar person.

However, this doesn't happen with all the strangers we encounter. In his book *Moral Tribes* (2012), Joshua Greene of Harvard University explains how we are also wired for 'Tribalism'. We do not instinctively avoid strangers from our *own* community, because they resemble us to some extent - in race, language and mannerisms.

Unfortunately, immigrants are usually excluded from the national tribe. Greene writes, "We intuitively divide the world into Us and Them" - Ingroup vs. Outgroup. Research by MIT's Mina Cikara and colleagues (2011) reveal that we often fail to empathize with individuals whom we perceive as Outgroup members, even displaying *schadenfreude* in competitive contexts.

Hence, we not only mentally categorize immigrants as 'outsiders', we fail to empathize with them and secretly take pleasure when bad things befall them.

What's worse is that our brains then try to justify our aversion responses post-hoc. We subsequently cook up excuses after we choose to sit away from the immigrant on the subway train – the man looks dirty, that woman is talking loudly. As such interactions recur, we develop and harden our biases. Michigan State University's Cara Talaska and colleagues (2008) found that "emotional prejudices will strongly predict discrimination".

While our subway example appears innocuous, it becomes serious when such aversion responses sum up over our daily routines, and multiply across individuals. The cumulative effect is that societies neglect and marginalize the immigrants in our midst. This effect is exacerbated as immigrants are usually relegated to low-paying jobs and live in poor neighborhoods.

Currently, there are 231 million people (or 3.2% of the world population) living as immigrants, and such dynamics can have explosive outcomes. Immigrant riots in Paris (2005) and Stockholm (2013) happened largely because immigrants felt marginalized by the incumbent population. Even where violence has not erupted, tensions between incumbents and immigrants can easily flare up.

All this seems a high price to pay for what stems from an emotional response to someone being of an unfamiliar race.

Fortunately, there is hope. Affective science suggests ways to overcome our biological hard-wiring against immigrants. I highlight two here:

### **1. We can learn to empathize with Outgroups.**

In a year-long field experiment in Rwanda in 2009, Harvard University's Elizabeth Paluck found that listening to a radio soap opera promoting ethnic reconciliation resulted in participants having improved empathy and receptiveness toward inter-race marriages between Hutu-Tutsi couples.

This implies that empathy for Outgroups can be learnt, and mass media programming can be effectively used to promote social norms that encourage the acceptance of immigrants.

### **2. We can re-define mental boundaries to perceive Outgroup members as part of the Ingroup**

In a 2001 experiment, University of California's Robert Kurzban and colleagues made participants watch a four-minute conversation between eight people belonging to two groups. At first, participants incorrectly grouped individuals by race. But when the experiment was repeated with groups distinguished by yellow and grey shirts, participants were able to use their shared appearance to group individuals correctly *in spite of* their race.

This demonstrates that we can disrupt Outgroup boundaries that we mentally hold by altering the social context. We can encourage people to be more accepting of immigrants by deploying 'cultural mimicry' to help them blend in. In practical terms, cost-effective programs can show immigrants how to dress, speak and behave like citizens.

In conclusion, while our biases against immigrants can be traced back to biological instinct, we can stimulate empathy and inclusiveness to overcome its divisive effects.

The take-away for governments is that immigrant policies need to extend beyond the 'standard' social service approaches to improve welfare. Equally (if not more) important is the need to address inter-group emotions that lie at the heart of discrimination.

(780 words)

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