

Life purpose buffers bad moods triggered by diversity

4 September 2013, by Ted Boscia

Being in the minority in an ethnically diverse crowd is distressing, regardless of your ethnicity, unless you have a sense of purpose in life, reports a Cornell developmental psychologist.

Anthony Burrow, assistant professor of human development in the College of Human Ecology, led the study, which was conducted on Chicago trains. The findings shed light on how people encounter diversity in everyday settings at a time when the United States is more racially mixed than ever, with [demographic trends](#) pointing to a more multicultural melting pot in decades to come.

In two experiments, college students reported their mood as they rode a train from Chicago's North Side toward the city center for 14 consecutive stops, while Burrow's team privately recorded naturally occurring changes to the overall ethnic and gender makeup of the car's passengers during the trip. For the first study, all 111 participants filled out a short questionnaire to assess their life purpose prior to boarding. In the second study, before riding, half of the 116 participants completed a 10-minute [writing exercise](#) about life purpose, while the others responded to a question about movies.

Participants' [negative mood](#) heightened as the ratio of people from different [ethnic backgrounds](#) aboard the train increased, regardless of their own race and after controlling for various factors, such as an individual's personality, [familiarity](#) with metro trains and perceived safety of the surrounding neighborhoods. In both studies, however, those who had a sense of purpose or had written about their life aims did not experience the worsened mood associated with riding among a diverse crowd.

"This research is among the first to show negative reactivity to diversity occurs dynamically within people, and not just between them," Burrow said. "That is, it is not simply that people who reside in

more ethnically diverse communities experience greater distress than those living in less ethnically [diverse communities](#), as suggested by past studies. Now we can see that when a person is in a more ethnically diverse setting, they feel more distressed than when they are in less ethnically diverse settings."

But the negative feelings vanished in purpose-driven individuals. Burrow, whose research focuses on the value of purpose, particularly among teens and young adults, suspects that it enabled participants to look beyond themselves to appreciate their role in the world and to build the psychological resilience necessary to overcome adversity.

"There is evidence that focusing on personally meaningful and valued goals can buffer the negative effects of stress by allowing individuals to reinforce a sense of who they are," he said. "This suggests that creating opportunities for individuals to cultivate a sense of purpose is important as we move forward as a society."

Burrow warned that the study should not be misread as rejecting multiculturalism, even if diversity can be distressing for people.

"Neither previous research nor our interpretation of the current findings suggest that diversity is inherently problematic," Burrow said. "In fact, there are many reasons to believe ethnically diverse friendships, classrooms and workplaces are optimal for high-quality outcomes."

The study, "Derailed by Diversity?: Purpose Buffers the Relationship Between Ethnic Composition on Trains and Passenger Negative Mood," was published online Aug. 27 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* and was co-authored by Patrick Hill of Carleton University.

More information:

psp.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/08/26/0146167213499377.full

Provided by Cornell University

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