

5. No room for prejudice

Students' racial prejudice is reduced when they share their university accommodation with roommates from a different ethnic group.

Colette Van Laar at Leiden University in The Netherlands and her American colleagues measured the racial prejudice of 3,877 students the summer before they started at the University of California in Los Angeles, and then measured it again at the end of the academic year. The researchers took advantage of the fact that most students are randomly allocated their first year accommodation, so they don't choose their roommates. They then looked at how a student's racial attitudes changed, depending on who they had been sharing with. Thirty-six per cent of the student sample were White, 36 per cent were Asian American, 18 per cent Latino, 6 per cent African American and 8 per cent were of another ethnicity.

Overall, students who shared accommodation with one or more people from a different ethnic background, expressed reduced racial prejudice at the year's end compared with the previous summer, particularly towards the ethnic group to which their roommate(s) belonged. There was also some generalisation of this effect towards other racial groups. In particular, students who shared with someone of African American descent showed reduced prejudice towards people of Latino descent, and vice versa.

“Roommates have equal status, must work cooperatively and have the common goal of maintaining a home environment that is mutually satisfactory”, the authors said. “. the familiarity and mere exposure afforded by living together is likely to generate positive affective ties between roommates”.

Also on a positive note, the researchers found no evidence that a student's racial prejudice was increased by sharing accommodation with people who had the same ethnicity as them.

Laar, C.V., Levin, S., Sinclair, S. & Sidanius, J. (2005). The effect of university roommate contact on ethnic attitudes and behaviour. *Journal of Experimental and Social Psychology*, 329-345.