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Racial Bias in Offender Identification

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Abstract

This study was examined whether there is a bias to attribute criminal activities more to one race than another. Participants read scenarios of different crimes (bank robbery, fraud, and murder) and rated the likelihood that the perpetrator of each crime was Black, White, or Hispanic. As anticipated, the perpetrators were overwhelmingly identified as male. Results also found a strong interaction between race of perpetrator and type of crime. Blacks were more likely identified as the perpetrator of the violent crimes of murder and bank robbery and Whites were more likely identified as the perpetrator of the non-violent crime, fraud. These results suggest that Black-as-criminal and Black-as-violent perceptions exist. Further research should investigate which descriptor terms and racialized language trigger stereotypes.

Keywords: perception, criminal activity, bias, Black-as-criminal, Black-as-violent

Racial Bias in Offender Identification

More attention has been paid in recent years to the high incarceration rates and police shootings of unarmed Black men. One possible explanation for these phenomena is the racial intolerance in America, and more specifically, the idea of Blackness being equivalent to crime. This became a more prominent stereotype after the Civil Rights movement (Welch, 2007). This perception, often fueled by the media, likely increases fears and expectations of violence perpetrated by Black men. "Today's prevailing criminal predator has become a euphemism for young Black male" (Barack, 1994).

There is a cultural stereotype that associates Blacks, more specifically, Black men, with the stereotype of being hostile, aggressive, violent, and dangerous (Graham & Lowery, 2004). Although the universal opinion and conditions of Black people have improved throughout the years, the stereotype of a young Black man as a criminal threat has been observed in both domestic and foreign countries (Welch, 2007). This negative association with Black people seems to be consistent and frequent as well as automatic. Eberhard, Goff, Purdie, and Davies (2004) propose that "merely thinking about Blacks can lead people to evaluate ambiguous behavior as aggressive, to miscategorize harmless objects as weapons, or to shoot quickly, and, at times, inappropriately...Black faces and Black bodies can trigger thoughts of crime, thinking of crime can trigger thoughts of Black people—that is, some associations between social groups and concepts are bidirectional." In fact, neighborhoods with a high percentage of young Black men have higher perceived rates of crime, even when actual measures of the crime rate are controlled (Quillian & Pager, 2001). The perception that Blacks live nearby, also increases the perception of crime threat (Chiricos, McEntire, & Gertz, 2001). Additionally, young Black men are perceived as taller, heavier, and more muscular, and thus more physically threatening than

young White men (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). Najdowski, Bottoms, & Goff (2015) state that the automatic linking of race and crime can unconsciously influence what police officers see when they encounter Black citizens, how they interpret what they see, and how they act in response.

Such stereotypes can be subconsciously activated and may have an influence on behavior without purposeful intent or knowledge from the individual involved (Payne, 2001). Milner, George, and Allison (2016) report that for most height and weight categories, Black and Hispanic suspects were at an increased risk of being frisked or searched by police compared to their White counterparts. Suspects perceived as tall and heavy were at an increased risk of physical police punishment regardless of race, however tall, heavy, Black and Hispanic men had the greatest risk of all. The subconscious activation of stereotypes has been defined as "modern racism". According to Entman (1990) modern racism is a concept where racial superiority, hostility, and disdain is not overt in actions or opinions, but rather is an extensive "anti-Black affect" where Blacks are equated to negative stereotypes, such as criminals. By equating Blacks to these stereotypes (hostile, aggressive, violent) modern racism is being practiced. This stereotypical opinion of Blacks is evident not only in Whites, but Blacks as well (Najdowski et al., 2015). Reverend Jesse Jackson, civil rights activist, minister, and politician admitted to feeling a sense of relief when encountering strangers on urban streets at night who were not young Black men. Former Democratic Senator Bill Bradley even states, " the fear of Black crime covers the streets like a sheet of ice" (Chiricos, Welch, & Gertz, 2004). It is this idea of fear perception that the media specifically cultivates in the minds of all who watch, regardless of race (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005). People of color are often associated with criminality on local news programs which then activates crime stereotypes regarding Blacks that can be used in

subsequent judgments (Dixon, 2008). These portrayals can lead to two outcomes. The first is an endorsement or confirmation of Black negative stereotypes as far as crime, poverty, hostility, etc. The second is modern racism in the forms of hostility toward Blacks, resistance to the advancement of Blacks, or the belief that racism does not exist and its systematic oppression has no effect on the progression of Blacks (Dixon, 2008).

Barlow (1998) suggests that it is unnecessary to speak directly of race because talking about crime is talking about race. Given the visual nature of media, suspects most often are paired with racial imagery. Race is usually the dominant cue emphasized, however when educational attainment, employment status, family background, and other demographic information is mentioned, race is conveyed automatically. The media links two phenomena: crime is violent and criminal behavior is associated with race (Gilliam Jr., & Iyengar, 2000; Dixon, 2008). In 2015, the Black population was estimated to be 13 percent of the US population (US Census Bureau, 2015). In the same year, Blacks committed 26 percent of the total crimes in America (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015). However, of the 2.3 million people incarcerated, 1 million (43.5%) are Black (NAACP, n.d.).

The present study was designed to examine the association between criminal activity and race. It was hypothesized that there is a bias to attribute certain criminal activities more to one race than another. Similar to the goals of Graham and Lowery (2004), the goal of the present study was to examine whether stereotypes would be activated without awareness on the part of the participant simply by the nature of the crimes described. Research supports the idea of an automatic link between "Blackness and crime" and therefore it is hypothesized that Blacks will be more likely associated with violent crimes than Whites or Hispanics.

Method

Participants

This study included 157 college students from a northeastern university. The age range was 17 to 49, with a median age of 18. Twenty-six (17%) self-identified as Black, 38 (24%) self-identified as Hispanic, and 93 (59%) self-identified as White. Eighty percent of the sample was female.

Materials

Scenarios were created describing a bank robbery, fraud, and murder. The crimes were adapted from randomly selected descriptions on the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (n.d.) most wanted website (https://www.fbi.gov/wanted/topten). All personal characteristics that identify the offenders' names, races, and genders were removed. In some cases, the extent of the description were changed to eliminate graphic depictions of the crime. In other cases, the crime descriptions were changed by adding details of clothing worn, prior job history, and/or physical characteristics of the offender (See Appendix A). The first scenario presented was bank robbery, followed by fraud, and then murder. For each crime, participants were asked to predict the perpetrator's sex, the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black, White, or Hispanic, and to decide how long the perpetrator should serve in prison if sentenced for the crime in terms of years or months. The sentencing data was not included in the present analyses since the question was often misunderstood by participants. The sex of the perpetrator was not included in any analyses since the overwhelming majority of participants identified the perpetrators as male; bank robbery (98%), fraud (82%), and murder (98%).

Procedure

Students enrolled in lower level Psychology courses were invited to participate in order to fulfill a research participation requirement at the University. The survey was accessed through the online survey software, Qualtrics. A consent form was presented prior to the survey and if participants agreed to participate the survey was then displayed. Participants were instructed to read each crime scenario and answer the questions for each scenario. Following the completion of the survey, a debriefing form was displayed.

Results

A 3x3 Repeated Measures ANOVA found significant main effects for race of perpetrator, $F(2, 312) = 18.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .108$. and type of crime, $F(2, 312) = 15.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .089$. The race of perpetrator x type of crime interaction was also significant, $F(4, 624) = 95.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .379$. See Table 1 for the simple effect means.

Table 1

Likelihood Means for Race of Perpetrator by Type of Crime

	Bank Robbery	Fraud	Murder
Race of Perpetrator	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*
Black	39.99 (16.99)	19.59 (14.05)	41.12 (17.88)
White	30.15 (18.14)	49.99 (26.62)	22.39 (17.42)
Hispanic	25.41 (11.88)	18.36 (12.93)	36.84 (17.40)

A One-way ANOVA found a significant difference in the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black, White, or Hispanic in the bank robbery, $F(2, 312) = 22.87$, $p < .001$. See Table 1 for likelihood means and standard deviations. Post-hoc analysis found that the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black was greater than the likelihood that the perpetrator was White, which was greater than the likelihood that the perpetrator was Hispanic. See Table 2.

Table 2

Paired Samples t-tests for Race of Perpetrator by Type of Crime

_____

| Race Comparisons	*M (SD)*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Bank Robbery				
Black with White	9.25 (31.98)	3.623	156	.000
Black with Hispanic	13.99 (21.46)	8.17	156	.000
White with Hispanic	4.74 (24.49)	2.43	156	.016
Fraud				
Black with White	-30.39 (33.12)	-11.50	156	.000
Black with Hispanic	1.23 (13.71)	1.123	156	.263
White with Hispanic	31.62 (32.21)	12.30	156	.000
Murder				
Black with White	18.73 (28.40)	8.26	156	.000
Black with Hispanic	4.28 (24.57)	2.18	156	.031
White with Hispanic	-14.45 (26.86)	-6.74	156	.000

A One-way ANOVA found a significant difference in the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black, White, or Hispanic in the fraud case, $F(2, 312) = 130.09$, $p < .001$. See Table 1 for the likelihood means and standard deviations. Post-hoc analysis found that the likelihood that the perpetrator was White was greater than the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black or Hispanic. The likelihood that the perpetrator was Black or Hispanic was equal. See Table 2.

A One-way ANOVA found a significant difference in the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black, White, or Hispanic for the murder, $F(2, 312) = 42.54$, $p < .001$. See Table 1 for likelihood means and standard deviations. Post-hoc analysis found that the likelihood that the perpetrator was Black was greater than the likelihood that the perpetrator was White, which was greater than the likelihood that the perpetrator was Hispanic. See Table 2.

Discussion

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between racial bias in perpetrator identification as a function of the type of crime. It was hypothesized that there is a bias to attribute certain criminal activities more to one race than others. The results of the present study suggest that the likelihood that a perpetrator would be identified as either Black, White, or Hispanic is influenced by the type of crime. As Figure 1 depicts, perpetrators were much more likely identified as Black when the crime was violent or threatened violence (murder and bank robbery). The non-violent crime of fraud was more likely attributed to a White perpetrator.

Figure 1. Likelihood that the Perpetrator is Black, White, or Hispanic by Type of Crime.
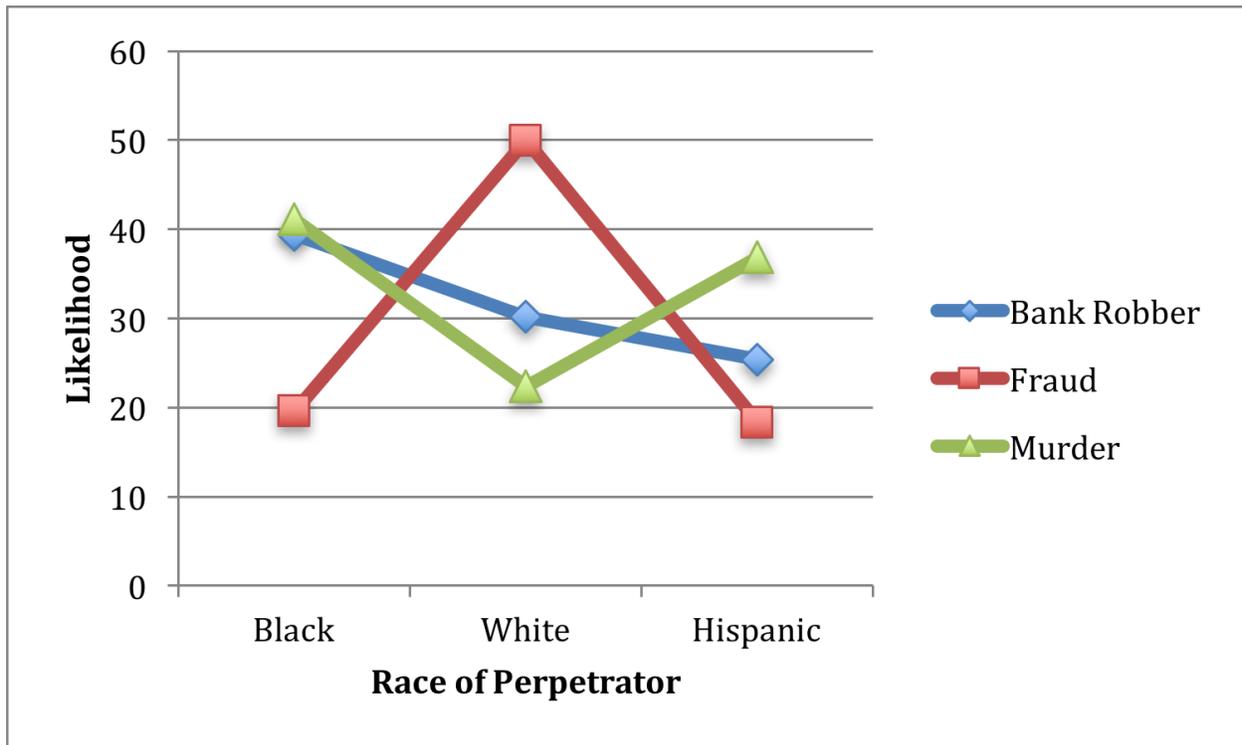
These findings mirror those of Oliver and Fonash (2002) who found a correlation between crime

and race with Black men identified more with violent crimes than non-violent crimes. Chiricos et

al. (2004) found a racial typification of crime, particularly among Whites. This association of

Black men with violence might be a reflection of the tendency of Black men, and boys, to be

seen as physically threatening (bigger, taller, more muscular, etc.) than young White men and

boys (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017). Thus, this view of Black men as physically

threatening and violent might influence police officials' interactions with Black communities

(Najdowski et al., 2015) and might also influence the high rates of incarceration of Black men

(Chiricos et al., 2004). These factors, which link crime and race, might also create a vicious

cycle due to their potential to spiral into modern day racism (Entman, 1990) and criminalize

Black men whether they have committed crimes or not. Studies on violent behavior among

individuals with BPD indicate that emotion dysregulation is a longitudinal mediator of violent

behavior and may be a primary mechanism that increases risk for violence in this population

This study is significant for a number of reasons. First, it supports previous research

which demonstrates a bias towards Black males that is shared among races (e.g., Najdowski et

al., 2015). Second, it highlights the need to address the media's influence on, and perpetuation of,

stereotypical perceptions of "Blacks as violent criminals". Such perceptions influence

expectations of criminality in communities with a high percentage of young Black men (Quillian

& Pager, 2001) which in turn might influence police activity and responses (Eberhard et al.,

2004). Finally, it broadens the discussion about the concerns expressed in the Black community

about over-policing, police shootings, and incarceration rates.

Several limitations of this study must be addressed. This study surveyed young adults,

mostly female, at a northeastern university. The participants were categorized by race through

self-identification as Black, White, or Hispanic. Additionally, potentially racialized language in

the passages might have influenced the results and should be further examined. Future research

should embark on expanding the impact of racial stereotyping of other races, for example, those

who identify as middle eastern. Researchers should further investigate actual physical stature and

whether the criminal perception of Black men skews the reality of their stature as being bigger,

taller, and heavier. More attention should also focus on the relationship between "Black as

criminal" stereotype and sentencing. A better understanding of the issues addressed in the

present study might influence policies and procedures related to responses to the black

community and the criminal justice system.

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Appendix A

Research project: Criminal Activity, Perceptions, and Sentencing

Please indicate your age, gender, and race below.

 Age: _____

Gender: Male _____   Female _____

Race: Black/African American (non-hispanic) _____

         Latina/Latino _____

         White (non-hispanic) _____

         Other (please indicate) _____

Below you will find three scenarios that describe a criminal activity. Descriptions of the

criminal are not included. Please read each scenario carefully and make a determination about

the criminal's race and gender.

1. An unknown individual entered a bank, produced a weapon, and verbally demanded money.

After receiving an undisclosed amount of money, the subject then fled the bank in a vehicle that

was waiting outside. Witnesses reported seeing the individual wearing timberlands and a dark

hoodie that covered the face, as well as a facial mask covering the lip area. Based on this

information only, what is your best conclusion about the following characteristics?

 Please do not use any percentage more than once and make sure that the total of the percentages

equals 100%.

What is the likelihood that this individual is black? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is white? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is Hispanic? Give answer in percentage. _____%

Do you think this person is male or female. Circle one.

Imagine that you were selected for the jury when the subject was apprehended and goes to trial. What would your sentencing be for this crime (in years and/or months or indicate that you would choose probation).

_____ years   or   _____months

 2. An unknown individual is wanted for their alleged involvement in a mortgage-related scheme that defrauded individuals out of nearly $4 million dollars. In the past, the individual has worked in various occupations including investments and sales.

        Please do not use any percentage more than once and make sure that the total of the percentages equals 100%.

What is the likelihood that this individual is black? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is white? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is Hispanic? Give answer in percentage. _____%

Do you think this person is male or female. Circle one.

Appendix A, con't

Imagine that you were selected for the jury when the subject was apprehended and goes to trial. What would your sentencing be for this crime.

_____ years   or   _____months

3. An unknown individual is wanted for involvement in the death of a 12-year-old boy. The victim was brutally beaten and shot after refusing to show a gang sign. The individual has visible tattoos on the neck.

Please do not use any percentage more than once and make sure that the total of the percentages equals 100%.

What is the likelihood that this individual is black? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is white? Give answer in percentages.   _____%

What is the likelihood that this individual is Hispanic? Give answer in percentage. _____%

Do you think this person is male or female. Circle one.

Imagine that you were selected for the jury when the subject was apprehended and goes to trial. What would your sentencing be for this crime.

_____ years   or   _____months