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## **Stereotyping, Racism, and the College Student**

**Martha Tarnowski**

*This experiment intended to study how college students use racism and stereotyping in judging new people as well as how influential these assumptions can be. It will also examine whether women are more likely than men to use stereotypes as a basis for their opinion and whether the severity of the stereotype has anything to do with the amount of influence it has on a person's judgment. Participants will be given a questionnaire regarding demographics and their personal opinions on racism and stereotyping as well as a short scenario with questions regarding their reaction to what they read. The study found significance regarding each of the hypotheses.*

Most people are not willing to admit it but a certain amount of judgment occurs when meeting someone for the first time. While many believe that race and stereotyping are not as influential as in years past, it seems to still play a prevalent role in society. When meeting someone new, most college students will most likely make some sort of snap judgment about the person based on their physical appearance. The question is how much this will affect their opinion of the person.

In a study by Peruche and Plant (2006), participants were shown a picture of either a White or Black college man along with a picture of either a neutral or sports-related object. They found that when the picture depicting a Black man was shown, participants were more than likely to identify sports-related objects as neutral and neutral objects as sports-related. However, when the man in the picture was White, this did not happen. This may show that people rely on the stereotype that Black men may tend to be more athletic than White men.

In another study conducted by Izumi and Hammonds (2007), individuals were given descriptions of a Korean, Mexican, or Jewish individual that were either stereotypical or nonstereotypical. The stereotypical descriptions of the Jewish and Mexican individual were linked with less favorable ratings while this was not the case with the description of the Korean individual. This could be due to the fact that Jewish and Mexican stereotyping is more prevalent in the United States and, therefore, would be more likely to have an effect on the participant's opinion.

Marcus, Mullins, Brackett, Tang, Allen, and Pruett (2003) conducted a study about students' observations of racial discrimination on a college campus. They found that Black students saw more of a racial bias in how Non-blacks acted than White students saw in the actions of Non-white students. Students also reported a lower level of racial bias in regards to the campus than the instructors. Marcus et al. indicate that this shows that students would be more susceptible to covert discrimination than overt. It also indicated students would be more likely to feel discrimination in class than on campus.

A study by Hall and Closson (2005) studied White graduate students at historically Black colleges or universities and Black students at traditionally White campuses. This study found that Black students were actually more well-adjusted than White students and that the White students actually felt a larger sense of exclusion. It also showed that the White students did not want to accept the fact that there were Black students who may have better skills than their own. Another interesting finding from this study had to do with a Black faculty member and the White students. Even after being told straightforwardly that the Black faculty member did not like White women, the White students showed reluctance to attribute his behavior to racial feelings and instead tried to offer other reasons such as role, gender, or personality.

Finally, in a study by Merrit and Harrison (2006), participants were given two scripts about a person named Chris that were neutral in terms of gender and ethnicity. The study found that European Americans would most frequently identify Chris as European American while attributions by African Americans were more diverse and more likely to identify Chris as a person of color, not necessarily African American, rather than European American. This may be due to the fact that European Americans show an automatic preference for their own ethnicity. The study also revealed that African Americans would be more likely to make attributions based in ethnicity while European Americans were more likely to make gender attributions.

The current study was designed to examine not only how college students use racism and stereotyping in their judgments of new people but also how influential these assumptions can be. The purpose was to see how much college students let stereotyping and racism affect their opinions of strangers. The study also examined whether women are more likely than men to use stereotypes as a basis for their opinion about someone and whether the severity of the stereotype (i.e. racial versus physical appearance such as clothing) has anything to do with the amount of influence it has on a person's judgment.

## Method

### *Participants*

There were a total of 69 participants. However, due to fact that any foreign exchange students were excluded from analysis, the final number of participants was 47. Out of these 47, there were 29 women, 18 men. Thirty-four of the participants were Caucasian, seven were African-American, two were Hispanic/Latino, one was Asian, and three qualified themselves as other. There were 15 freshman, 20 sophomores, seven juniors, and five seniors. Ages ranged from 18 to 27 years old. All participants were recruited through the Human Subject Pool at

Lindenwood University which is comprised of all students in general education psychology, anthropology, and sociology courses. In return for participation in experiments, subjects received extra credit in whichever of these courses they were enrolled.

### *Materials*

There was a questionnaire regarding racism and stereotyping (see Appendix A) as well as two versions of a short scenario with corresponding questions (see Appendix B). The questionnaire consists of questions regarding demographic information about the participant as well as how questions regarding racism and stereotyping. Questions regarding racism and stereotyping asked how often the participant felt as though they were the subject of stereotyping and racism, how often they used stereotyping and racism in their judgments, and how prevalent they believed racism and stereotyping are in society. The scenario portion had one version with a Caucasian man and one with an African-American man. They were both the same in every other aspect of description. The first few questions following the scenario asked about the reactions and assumptions the participant felt and made. There was also a second set of questions that gave minor changes to the scenario, that is, opposite race or different age, and asked whether that would change the participants original reaction.

There was also an informed consent form and feedback letter that participants were given. There was an extra credit slip and experimenter's list of participants that participants were asked to fill out. Other materials included a manila envelope for all completed paperwork and a pen. Young Hall 105 Lab A was used for the majority of the experiments. This room contained a desk, two chairs, a computer, and a television cart. Young Hall 105 Lab B was also used for a small portion of experiments which contained three chairs, a desk, a table, and a computer. The door was kept closed during experiments in both labs.

*Procedure*

Participants were tested individually. They were asked to sit on one side of the table while the experimenter sat on the opposite side. First, they were asked to fill out the extra credit form and experimenter's list of participants, followed by two copies of the informed consent form. The participant kept one copy of the informed consent form and the other went to the experimenter. The participant was then given one of two versions of a short scenario and asked to read it and respond to the questions following. Once finished with the questions, they were then given a questionnaire to fill out. During this time the experimenter left the room and closed the door. Once they were finished with the questionnaire, participants were given a manila envelope and told to seal the scenario and questionnaire inside. They were then informed that the envelope would not be opened until the experimenter had finished gathering data that no answers could be associated with them. They were then given a feedback letter, told what the study was regarding, and thanked by the experimenter.

*Results*

To determine the participant's judgment rating, the score from their initial reaction to the scenario was combined with the score of how uncomfortable they would feel in the given situation. To determine the severity rating, it was counted how many times a participant answered "yes" to the seven questions following the initial reaction ratings. Regarding the hypothesis of whether the severity of a stereotype has an influence on the person's judgment, a relatively strong correlation was found:  $r = 0.504$ . It was also interesting to note that only five of the forty-seven participants admitted that race would be a factor in their reaction. As for the hypothesis regarding a sex difference in a stereotype's influence in judgment, significance was

also found:  $t_{(45)} = -3.855$ ,  $p < .05$ . And finally, regarding the hypothesis concerning sex differences in the influence of a stereotype's severity, significance was also found:  $t_{(45)} = -3.087$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### Discussion

Overall, this study did reveal significance regarding the influence of stereotyping and racism on college students. It was found that the more severe a stereotype is, the more likely a person will be influenced by it when making judgments about new people. It was also found that women are more likely than men to be influenced by both the stereotype alone as well as its level of severity. Overall, women reported being more uncomfortable and intimidated by the given scenario than men did. This result could be due to the fact that women are much more wary of their surroundings and are more likely to be intimidated by a male when they are walking alone at night.

In terms of how their initial judgments were influenced, students who responded "yes" to the question concerning the subject's appearance commonly stated the fact that a more well-dressed individual was more likely to be successful or more well-educated and therefore would seem to pose less of a threat. The people who answered "yes" to the question regarding race stated reasons such as growing up in a rough neighborhood where people would rob you or it would depend on the location or statistically more crimes are committed in the city and the majority of people there are black. In terms of having more people with them, the majority of people stated they would feel safer because there is safety in numbers. Those who answered "yes" to the question regarding whether their reaction would differ if the situation were to occur during the day stated that the fact that it was light out and there are usually more people around to act as witnesses would make them feel more secure. Regarding the question of whether a woman in the scenario instead of a man would make a difference, most people responded that

they would feel safer because they felt as though they could hold their ground better against a woman than a man.

This study did have a few limitations. The main limitation seemed to be that, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it could be that participants were wary of answering completely truthfully and instead answered in ways that they believed were socially desirable. Also, due to the fact that exchange students were excluded, there was a very uneven amount of men and women and there was a smaller group overall than was originally intended. A solution to this would have been to either include exchange students or to survey classes rather than rely on individuals signing up. Another issue that should have been addressed would have been to ask whether participants had ever been in a situation similar to what was given in the scenario. A woman who had been mugged, for example, would be much more likely to have a strong reaction compared to someone who never experienced a similar situation.

As for future directions, it would be interesting to conduct a study either solely focused on exchange students or comparing them to native students. It is possible that there could be significant differences found between the two groups due to the fact that exchange students are minorities and that would make them more likely to be exposed to the issues. It would also be interesting, although difficult, to study differences between college students and the opinions of their parents. It seems as though the influence of stereotyping and racism has decreased from one generation to the next and that college students are more open to different types of people than the generation of parents that may have grown up during the time of extreme racial tensions.



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Appendix A

Questionnaire

1. Circle one: Male Female

2. What race are you: Caucasian African-American Hispanic/Latino

Asian Native-American

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What year did you graduate high school? \_\_\_\_\_

5. What year are you in college?

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

6. How often do you think you are the subject of a stereotype?

(1= never and 5= always)

1 2 3 4 5

6a. How so?

7. How often do you think you are the subject of racism?

(1= never and 5= always)

1 2 3 4 5

7a. How so?

8. How often have you let stereotypes affect your judgment of someone?

(1= never and 5= always)

1      2      3      4      5

8a. How so?

9. How often have you let racism affect your judgment of someone?

(1= never and 5= always)

1      2      3      4      5

9a. How so?

10. How prevalent do you think racism is in society today?

(1= not at all and 5= extremely)

1      2      3      4      5

11. How prevalent do you think stereotypes are in society today?

(1= not at all and 5= extremely)

1      2      3      4      5

Appendix B

Scenario:

You are walking alone at night and an overweight, middle-age African-American [stated as Caucasian in second scenario] man approaches you. He is dressed in baggy jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt and, at a glance, seems unruly and as though he could cause trouble.

Questions:

1. What is your initial reaction?

1 = not at all intimidated and 5 = very intimidated

1      2      3      4      5

2. How would this make you feel?

1 = not at all uncomfortable and 5 = very uncomfortable

1      2      3      4      5

3. What judgment would you make about the person?

4. What would you decide to do based on the judgment in 3?

5. Would you react differently if:

**If yes please specify how so**

A. he was dressed neatly in a shirt and tie?

YES

NO

B. he were Caucasian but dressed the same way given in the scenario?

YES NO

C. you were with someone else or a group of people?

YES NO

D. this happened during the day?

YES NO

E. the person was a female?

YES NO

F. he was your same age?

YES NO

G. he was of average weight?

YES NO

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