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Racial Stereotyping and Physical Perception of Crime

Jenn Malzone

A statistical analysis conducted by the United States Department of Justice stated that from 1976 to 2002, a surprisingly large number of murders committed were intra-racial, rather than inter-racial. The results claimed that 86% of Caucasian murder victims were killed by other Caucasians, and 94% of African American victims were killed by other African Americans. The present study was conducted to see if the average person perceives inter-racial crime to be more of a threat. Thirty-seven participants were given the task of assigning photographs of men from the two most prominent ethnic groups in the United States to various negative and positive roles. They were expected to associate photographs of men from their own race with the positive stereotypes, and photographs of men from other races with negative stereotypes. The results, however, were not significant at a level to support the hypothesis, and in some cases, went against the hypothesis.

It is known by those interested in psychology, sociology, or simply human nature that one's perception of something can be quite different than actual information based on facts. This could be true, for example, in cases of perception of risk or threat. There are many reasons for this dissonance between perception and fact, some of which include false images portrayed by the media or even life experiences. Often, having a skewed perception of some type of issue can be harmful. In a study based on stereotyping associated with the news media, this point is elaborated (Hoffman, 1991). "The news media have the power to be catalysts for positive change in many areas of our culture. Instead, the media often perpetuate stereotyping" (p. 22). Stereotyping begins at a young age, a construct formed

from memories of past experiences being aligned with cultural expectations (Norcross, 1990).

Based on statistics provided by the United States Department of Justice in 2003, a majority of the murders committed between 1976 and 2002 were intra-racial rather than inter-racial. Intra-racial refers to crime committed by a member of a race against another member of his or her own race. Inter-racial, on the other hand, involves a crime between members of different races. According to the Department of Justice, 86% of Caucasians were murdered intra-racially, and 94% of African American murders were also inter-racial. These results would point to the idea that intra-racial crime is much more of a threat than inter-racial. However, I felt that perhaps the general sentiments of Americans were to perceive inter-racial crime as a bigger threat, despite these concrete statistics.

Racial prejudice is an issue that has been studied since the 1940s (Bigler, 1993). The idea of skewed racial perception relates to the topic of xenophobia. Xenophobia is generally referred to as the irrational fear of or hatred towards strangers, foreigners, or anyone who is different. Often these biases are not consciously known; meaning, a person may not purposely be racist, rather he/she simply has an incorrect view of the situation (Winder, 2003). Again, factors such as the media can influence and perpetuate fear of those from other races. Another study on race and media concluded that the media was to blame (Stein, 1994). "The mainstream media's coverage of people of color is riddled with old stereotypes, offensive terminology, biased reporting, and myopic interpretations" (p. 2).

In the present study, the hypothesis was that, when given photos of members of various races and assigned the task of matching photos with negative and positive stereotypical roles, participants would choose members of their own race for the positive

roles, and members of other races for the negative roles. This could be associated with the perception that people from other races present more of a threat, and the belief that inter-racial crime is a bigger problem than intra-racial crime. The results of the study could be socially beneficial, and could provide more information to the public that would contribute to the decline of racism.

Method

Participants

The participants were 16 males and 21 females, ages 17 to 27 (with a mean age of 18). Based on their answers to a demographic survey, two of the participants identified as Asian, 10 identified as African American, 24 identified as Caucasian, and one identified as Hispanic. Seventeen of the participants were undergraduate students recruited from the Lindenwood Human Subject Pool. One student was underage (17), and therefore presented me with a signed copy of a parental consent form prior to taking the experiment.

The Human Subject Pool (HSP) consisted of lower level psychology, anthropology, and sociology students who received extra credit from their professors for participating. They were recruited by a sign up sheet posted on the HSP bulletin board on the 4th floor of Young Hall at Lindenwood University. The other 20 participants were recruited from Mokabe's, a coffeehouse located off Grand Avenue in the south city area of St. Louis. These participants were individually approached by me to participate in the study, and were not given compensation. I chose to use participants from these two locations in order to increase diversity. Lindenwood is a conservatively based private university, while Mokabe's is, in contrast, a liberal environment located in a more racially and economically diverse environment.

Experimental sessions were conducted by a female researcher.

Materials

Equipment used in the procedure consisted of a room, a table and chairs, pens, a survey, and the photos used in the experiment. The 16 photos (see Appendix A) contained individual head shots of men of various ages (about 26 to 57 years of age). Five of the men in the photos were African American, and 11 were Caucasian. These numbers were chosen to represent the racial balance of the American population. The pictures were counterbalanced and assigned numbers, with two pictures each on white sheets of paper. The photo backgrounds were controlled to be solid gray, and clothing was controlled to solid black. Five of the Caucasian men had facial hair, as did two of the African American men (facial hair was defined as a prominent mustache or beard that could clearly be viewed in the photo).

Experiments at Lindenwood were conducted in Lab A of the Psychology Lab, located on the basement floor of Young Hall. Experiments at Mokabe's were held in a small private room located in the back of the coffeehouse.

Procedure

Participants were given an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B) that explained the procedure that would occur. They began the experiment with the knowledge that they would be giving demographic information, as well as completing a task that involved assigning roles. I instructed them to examine 16 counterbalanced photos of men, leading them to believe that out of these sixteen men, there was one real college professor, one real terrorist, drug dealer, bank robber, doctor, and police officer. They were given an answer sheet and told to put down the number of the photo they thought was the real

professor/terrorist/etc next to the role name. They were given as much time as they needed, and were told that they could spread out the photos if need be. They were able to use the same photo twice, but each role name needed to correspond with one numerical answer.

This task was followed by the brief demographic survey asking their age, sex, and race. After completing the survey, the participants were debriefed and told about the study's actual purpose. I informed them that the men in the photos were actually completely random men - this activity was done to see which men they perceived to be associated with the positive or negative stereotypes. It was explained to the participants how this information would be related to feelings about inter/intra racial crime, hoping to demonstrate that the average person's perceptions differ from actual statistics. Finally, it emphasized that the study was being conducted with the hopes of being socially beneficial, but if at any time the participant felt uncomfortable, he/she had a right to withdraw from the study. None of the participants chose to withdraw. Some had further questions, which were answered in full. The study was concluded by giving the participants the feedback letter, which included my contact information.

When analyzing the results, the information from the two participants who identified as Asian, and the one participant who identified as Hispanic was omitted. This was because the men in the 16 photos only included African Americans and Caucasians, so it would be impossible to tell how these three participants viewed men from their own race in comparison.

Results

A chi-square analysis performed on the data concluded that only one role, the terrorist, was statistically significant. The analysis revealed .002, or $p < .05$, and actually

went against the hypothesis. The role of the bank robber resulted in .732, or $p > .05$, meaning that it was not significant. The role of the college professor resulted in .086, or $p > .05$, also not significant. The role of the drug dealer resulted in .303, or $p > .05$, not significant. The police officer was .732, or $p > .05$, not significant. Finally, the role of the doctor was .303, or $p > .05$, and was not significant.

In examining the frequencies in a chi-square test, the role of bank robber was chosen to be someone of the participant's own race 16 times, or 47 percent of the time. It was chosen to be someone of a different race 18 times, or 53 percent. Although this negative role was chosen most often as someone of a race different from the participant, it is not significant enough to support the hypothesis. The role of the college professor was chosen to be someone of the participant's own race 22 times, or 65 percent. It was chosen as a different race 12 times, or 35 percent. This also went with the hypothesis, but was not significant.

The role of the terrorist was picked as someone of the participant's own race 26 times, or 76 percent of the time. A person of another race was picked for the role 8 times, or 24 percent. This was significant, and did not support the hypothesis. The role of the drug dealer was picked as the same race as the participant 20 times, or 59 percent of the time. The opposite was picked 14 times, or 41 percent. This went with the hypothesis, but was not significant. The role of the police officer was picked as the same race 18 times (53 percent), and 16 times for the different race (47 percent). This supported the hypothesis, but was not significant. The role of doctor was picked as the same 20 times (59 percent) and the different 14 times (41 percent). This also supported the hypothesis, but was not significant.

The mode of each specific picture was examined in order to see which pictures were most often chosen for each role. The mode of the bank robber was photograph 16, an African American male that was chosen 8 times, or 24 percent. The mode for the identity of college professor was a three way tie between photograph 15, a Caucasian male, photograph 10, an African American male, and photograph 4, a Caucasian male. Each of these was chosen 8 times, or 24 percent. The mode for the identity of terrorist was photograph 14, a Caucasian male that was chosen 13 times, or 38 percent. The mode chosen for the identity of the drug dealer was photograph 2, an African-American male that was chosen 10 times, or 29 percent. The mode for the identity of police officer was photograph 9, a Caucasian male chosen 11 times, or 32 percent. The mode for the identity of doctor was photograph 10, an African American male chosen 8 times, or 24 percent.

Discussion

While the photos chosen for the positive roles went along with the hypothesis (all three being chosen most often as someone of the participant's own race), the results were not strong enough to be statistically significant. The negative roles ended up going against the hypothesis two out of three times, and only the results of the terrorist were significant (which also went against the hypothesis). These results, while not able to provide any conclusions, are still very interesting and could have multiple explanations.

The choosing of the subjects' own races for two out of three of the negative roles could be demonstrating that the average person perceives people from their own race as threatening. However, there is also the chance that these results occurred because of reverse racism. The process of reverse racism/discrimination can occur when a participant is focusing so heavily on not being racist that he or she will actually do the opposite. This is

something that could perhaps be somewhat controlled for in future studies by an increased number of photos (with men from a wider assortment of racial backgrounds), and with some roles included on the answer sheet that are not as polarized. For example, the roles of salesperson or neighbor could be included to balance out the extreme roles of bank robber and terrorist.

It should also be noted that participants most often chose the photos of men of their own race, regardless of whether the role they were assigning the photo to was negative or positive. This could mean that perhaps people are more likely to choose photos of their own race in general.

Photograph 14, the man chosen as the terrorist, was one of the five Caucasian men with facial hair in the study, and was one of the two with a beard. Photograph 8, the other man with a beard, was chosen as the terrorist six times (18 percent), almost three times more than any of the other photos. This could represent a stereotype that men with facial hair may be more likely to be viewed as terrorists. The news media could be blamed for this stereotype, as they have been criticized for contributing to the perception that a terrorist is often a man of Middle Eastern descent with facial hair.

Further analysis was conducted to see if the race of the participant affected the likelihood of choosing their own race or another race to fit the role. The results demonstrated that there was a difference in the percentages based on race. For the role of the bank robber, 30 percent of African American participants chose someone of their own race, while 70 percent chose the different race. Fifty-four percent of Caucasian participants chose someone of their own race, while 46 percent chose the different race. For the role of the college professor, African Americans chose the same race 70 percent of the time; Caucasians chose

the same 63 percent of the time. For the role of the terrorist, African Americans were split, with 50 percent choosing the same and 50 percent choosing different. Oppositely, 87 percent of Caucasians chose someone of their own race, leaving 13 percent that chose the different race. For the role of the drug dealer, 70 percent of African Americans chose the same race, while 54 percent of Caucasians chose the same race. For the role of the police officer, 70 percent of African Americans chose a different race, while 63 percent of Caucasians chose their own. Finally, 60 percent of African American participants chose someone of a different race for the role of the doctor, while 67 percent of Caucasians chose someone of their own race.

These results are interesting, as it shows that the two racial groups often differed in their responses. However, this could be a result of the lack of participant diversity and an unequal comparison, being that there were more Caucasian participants than African American participants (therefore greater assumptions were being made when analyzing statistics of the African American participants).

Some additional variables could have affected the results. For example, although measures were taken to make each photo uniform, it became necessary to take the photos in a variety of locations, leading to different background colors. Clothing was also attempted to be controlled, and was cropped out of the photo if not black or white. People being photographed were instructed to smile, but this command was obviously interpreted in a variety of ways, resulting in facial expressions that ranged from full smiles to neutral expressions. Finally, the men in the photos were a very wide variety of ages, and in some cases, the exact age was not known.

An increased sample size would most likely lead to more accurate results. It would be beneficial to replicate this study with 100 participants, perhaps with the issue of facial hair controlled for. A separate study examining the role of facial hair would also be worth investigating.

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Appendix A

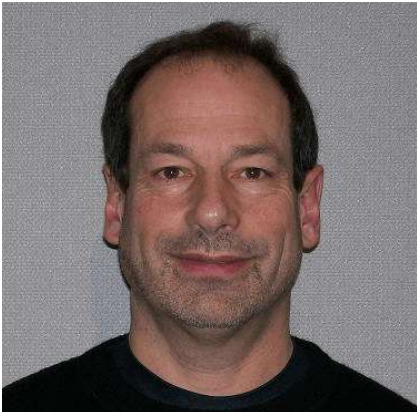
(photos not actual size – made smaller)



Photograph 1



Photograph 2



Photograph 3



Photograph 4



Photograph 5



Photograph 6



Photograph 7



Photograph 8



Photograph 9



Photograph 10



Photograph 11



Photograph 12



Photograph 13



Photograph 14



Photograph 15



Photograph 16

Appendix B

Feedback Letter

Thank you for participating in my study. The purpose of this study is to examine sentiments about inter/intra-racial crime. Statistics show that intra-racial crime (crime within people of the same race) occurs more often than inter-racial crime (crime between people of different races). These statistics interested me, as I felt the general sentiment of our society may actually be that inter-racial crime is more of a threat. Therefore the experiment you have completed was conducted to test whether the average person perceives inter-racial or intra-racial crime to be more threatening. The task of assigning photographs containing men of different races was set up in order to see if people tend to attribute those of their own race or different races with positive or negative images.

No negative feelings toward any race are intended to be expressed as a result of this study. If my hypothesis is proven correct, I hope to use the results to be socially beneficial – perhaps helping our society be more tolerant of other races. This also concerns the issue of xenophobia (defined as the tendency of people to fear and think less of those who are a different race). Once people are educated on what xenophobia is and how we subconsciously become victim to it, it may help to rid our society of it.

Please note that I am not interested in your individual results; rather, I am only interested in the results of a large group of consumers, of which you are now a part of. No identifying information about you will be associated with any of the findings.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter. If you are interested in obtaining a summary of the findings of this study at a later date, please contact me and I will make it available to you at the completion of this project.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Principal Investigators:

Jenn Malzone (314) 378-3811

Supervisors:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair 636-949-4371 (mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)

Appendix C Informed Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), understand that I will be taking part in a research project that requires me to complete a task involving matching pictures with identities. I will also be asked to complete a survey involving a disclosure of sex and race information. I understand that I should be able to complete this project within 15 minutes. I am aware that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that I may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty or prejudice. I should not incur any penalty or prejudice because I cannot complete the study. I understand that the information obtained from my responses will be analyzed only as part of aggregate data and that all identifying information will be absent from the data in order to ensure anonymity. I am also aware that my responses will be kept confidential and that data obtained from this study will only be available for research and educational purposes. I understand that any questions I may have regarding this study shall be answered by the researcher(s) involved to my satisfaction. Finally, I verify that I am at least 18 years of age and am legally able to give consent.

Date: _____

(Signature of participant)

Date: _____

(Signature of researcher obtaining consent)

Jenn Malzone (314) 378-3811

Supervisor:

Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair
Course Instructor
(636)-949-4371
mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

Appendix D
QUESTIONNAIRE

SUBJECT ID NUMBER: _____ (Assigned by Researcher)

1) Are you MALE FEMALE (circle one)

2) Which of the following racial categories taken from the US Census Bureau best describes your racial background?

AMERICAN INDIAN OR ALASKAN NATIVE

ASIAN

AFRICAN AMERICAN

PACIFIC ISLANDER

CAUCASIAN

HISPANIC

OTHER _____

3) What is your age? _____

Appendix E

Instructions

After receiving and signed the Informed Consent Form, you will be shown sixteen photographs of men. You will also be given a list of identities. Each identity has one photograph that belongs with it – for example, one of the identities listed is “bank robber,” and there is one photo in the group that actually contains a real bank robber. Your task is to decide which of the photographs contain the people that fit the identities. For example, decide which of the pictures you think is a photo of the real bank robber, then place its number next to the identity “bank robber” on the list. You can use the same photo more than once. All identities on the list need to be filled in.

Following this, please fill out the brief questionnaire.

Thank you.

Appendix F

IDENTITIES

Which photograph do you think is of the real:

Bank Robber _____

College Professor _____

Terrorist _____

Drug Dealer _____

Police Officer _____

Doctor _____

Millionaire _____

(Place number of photograph next to the correct identity. Guess which photo contains the real bank robber, college professor, terrorist, etc. A photo can be used more than once. Please put a number down for each identity. Choose only one for each identity.)