

Effects of Race and Gender on Perceptions of Intelligence and Aggression

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Abstract

A great deal of research has examined the impact of either gender or race on perceptions of intelligence or aggression, but rarely all of these together. A 2X2 between-subjects design was created to explore the interactions of these variables. Participants read one of four vignettes featuring either a Caucasian or African American male or female, then rated the intelligence and aggression of this hypothetical individual. Caucasian individuals were rated significantly more aggressive than African Americans; no other effects were statistically significant. These results contradict the original hypothesis.

Introduction

Race

Strong negative stereotypes of aggressive behavior exist about African Americans, despite contradicting evidence (FBI, 2013). These stereotypes have been demonstrated in the deaths of Sandra Bland, Natasha McKenna, and Jeremy McDole. In previous research:

- White women are more likely to perceive dialogue as more aggressive than African American women (Phelps, Meara, Davis, & Patton, 1991).
- African Americans who commit violent acts are viewed more negatively than Caucasians (Yang, Gibson, Lueke, Huesmann, & Bushman, 2014).
- African American individuals are more likely to be viewed as aggressive than Caucasian individuals (Sagar & Schofield, 1980).
- Anderson, Feia, and Celemans (2011), found evidence to the contrary. They suggested these findings to a recently adopted “post-racial” mindset.

Negative stereotypes about African Americans’ intelligence also exist:

- Race significantly impacts doctors’ perceptions of their patients’ intelligence (van Ryn & Burke, 2000).
- When matched for career and personality traits, African American public figures were judged in a more negative fashion than Caucasian figures (Haynie, 2011).

Gender

There is little research on the effects of gender on perceptions of aggression; the authors found no studies of the effect of gender on perceptions of intelligence. Research on perceptions of aggression has found:

- “Boy-boy” videos of children were judged to be less aggressive than “boy-girl” or “girl-girl” scenarios, possibly due to the stereotypes of male versus female aggression styles (Condry & Ross, 1985).
- Men were less likely than women to report seeing either aggressive or prosocial behavior (Ostrov, Crick, & Keating, 2005).

Hypotheses

1. African American individuals will be perceived as more aggressive than Caucasian individuals.
2. African American individuals will be perceived as less intelligent than Caucasian individuals.
3. Males will be perceived as more aggressive than females.
4. Males will be perceived as less intelligent than females.
5. African American males will be perceived as the most aggressive, followed by Caucasian males, African American females, and Caucasian females.
6. Caucasian females will be perceived as the most intelligent, followed by Caucasian males, African American females, and African American males.

References

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Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling with the SONA system. 80 undergraduate students participated in this study. Table 1 and Table 2 show participant demographic breakdowns by gender and race/ethnicity.

Design and Measures

This was a 2 (race) X 2 (gender) between-subjects factorial experiment. Participants read one of four vignettes about an individual they meet at a party.

- The race and gender of this individual varied as per the conditions above.
- In order to keep the vignettes as similar as possible, the individual was given a unisex name: Jamie Williams. In each vignette, Jamie’s physical appearance, sexual orientation, and dialogue remained constant.

The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) and the Sternberg Intelligence Factor Analysis (1981) were used to assess perceptions of Jamie Williams. The final survey consisted of 24 questions designed to test the perception of Jamie’s aggression and intelligence on a seven point scale.

How likely would you be to trust Jamie?

1 - Not Likely at All 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Extremely Likely

How sensitive to other people’s needs and desires do you believe that Jamie is?

1 - Not Sensitive at All 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Extremely Sensitive

The survey also consisted of eight demographic questions as well as seven sociological questions designed to provide insight into participants’ previous experience with differing racial groups.

Procedure

Participants were directed through the SONA software to a survey on the Qualtrics online platform. Prior to beginning the survey, participants read an informed consent form and gave electronic consent. Participants read one of four pre-constructed vignettes about Jamie Williams. The first half of the vignette consisted of Jamie describing his/her hobbies; the second half depicted a scenario in which Jamie was trying to verbally coerce an unknown individual. Participants then completed the survey and demographic questionnaire.

Results

Separate analyses were conducted for perceptions of aggression and perceptions of intelligence. The main effect of an individual’s race on perceptions of his/her aggression level was significant, $F(1, 64) = 5.69, p = 0.02$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions for perceptions of aggression. There were no significant findings for perceptions of intelligence. See Table 3 and Table 4 for means and standard deviations.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Aggression Levels

Race	Gender						n	M	SD	
	Male		Female		n	M				SD
	n	M	n	M						
African American	18	58.61	7.81	17	57.64	4.91	35	58.14	6.49	
Caucasian	19	62.95	5.91	14	60.93	6.58	33	62.09	6.19	

Note: Race and Gender refer to the individual described in the vignette read by the participants.

Table 4
Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Intelligence Levels

Race	Gender						n	M	SD	
	Male		Female		n	M				SD
	n	M	n	M						
African American	18	35.72	8.21	17	34.35	7.25	35	35.06	7.68	
Caucasian	19	30.32	6.96	14	34.07	9.90	33	31.91	8.40	

Note: Race and Gender refer to the individual described in the vignette read by the participants.

Discussion

Conclusion

This study generally aligned with previous research. A significant effect for aggression was found, but not in the order that we hypothesized: Caucasian individuals were perceived as significantly more aggressive than African American individuals. We found no significant effect for race on perceptions for intelligence, nor for gender on perceptions of intelligence or aggression. We found no interactions between race and gender.

Limitations & Future Prospects

All participants were enrolled in a psychology class. It is plausible that these students were more aware than average of issues such as discrimination, and therefore did not subscribe to the stereotypes being examined.

Additionally, due to the high-profile racially-charged deaths listed in the introduction, participants might have been aware of recent a social focus on race and gender. Therefore, it is possible that participants may have been affected by a social desirability response bias and attempted to align themselves differently than they may have otherwise. Future studies should aim to sample from a much larger population. Future studies could also compare perceptions of target individuals from two minority races rather than a majority and a minority.