

Introduction

Studies have supported that the association between Black faces and crime is automatic (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie & Davis, 2004). This means that thoughts of Black faces create thoughts of crime. Previous studies show that Black people with stereotypical or Afrocentric features are more likely to be victims of eyewitness misidentification than people of other races or Black people with typical features. As defined by Eberhardt, Davis, Purdie-Vaughns and Johnson (2006), stereotypical Black features are darker skin, broader noses, and fuller lips. Black people with stereotypical features tend to be associated with aggression and violence leading to higher rates of eyewitness misidentification, longer sentences, the death penalty, and wrongful arrests (Eberhardt et al., 2006; Kleider, Cavrak, & Knuycky, 2012; The Innocence Project 2017). Kleider-Offutt, Bond, Williams and Bohil (2018) found that even when facial expressions were controlled for both White and Black participants perceived Black faces with stereotypical features as threatening.

Studies have also shown that Black defendants with stereotypical features can serve up to 8 months longer in federal prisons than any other race or Black people with typical features. Eberhardt et al., 2006 found that jurors use stereotypical features as a cue of deathworthiness when the defendant is Black and the victim is white. Kleider et al., 2012 conducted a study that investigated whether stereotypicality was limited only to Black faces or if White people would also be categorized incorrectly as drug dealers if they had Black stereotypical features. Researchers found that there was no significant data supporting that White people with perceived Black stereotypical features were miscategorized by participants as drug dealers like they were with Black people.

The current study seeks to investigate whether stereotypical features included in eyewitness facial descriptions are associated with false identifications, and whether or not that association is limited to descriptions of Black faces. More specifically, this study aims to identify whether the number of stereotypical features mentioned in participants' descriptions of a Black robber and White robber is associated with higher false identification rates. The study further aims to identify whether the presence of certain stereotypical features is associated with more false identification.

Method

Participants

A total of 192 participants were in the conditions required for this study. Out of the 192 participants 100 students were selected to fit the racial demographics. There was a total of 100 participants who identified as White or Caucasian.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were brought into the lab where they read and signed consent forms. Once they consented to the experiment, they were shown a video of a robbery with either a Black or White "robber". After watching the video participants were instructed to complete a 15-minute filler task. They were then asked to describe the robber's face for 5 minutes. Then, they viewed a photo lineup consisting of the robber and five other suspects. Participants were asked to identify the robber from the video or say that he was not present. After completing all required tasks, the participant completed a demographic questionnaire, was debriefed, and given the opportunity to ask any further questions.

	Black Robber				White Robber			
	Skin	Nose	Lips	None	Skin	Nose	Lips	None
Correct	0.27	0.41	0.33	0.21	0.53	0.67	0.83	0.59
False ID	0.25	0.18	0.17	0	0.20	0.22	0	0.67
Miss	0.48	0.41	0.50	0.08	0.27	0.11	0.17	0.75

Results & Discussion

An independent-measures *t*-test revealed that there was a significant difference in the number of stereotypical features reported for the Black ($M=1.50$, $SD= 1$) and White robber ($M=.50$, $SD= 0.81$), $t(98) = -5.50$, $p < 0.001$. The overall inaccuracy rate for the White robber ($n=28$) and Black robber ($n=36$) was marginally different but not statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N=100) = 2.78$, $p < .1$.

Although the following data is based only on descriptive analysis (statistical significance not proven), it gives insight into the role that stereotypical features might play in eyewitness misidentifications. Of those who reported skin tone in the verbal description of the Black robber, 25% made a false identification (identified the wrong suspect) and 48% "missed" the robber's face in lineup. In comparison 20% of people who reported skin tone in their verbal description of the White robber falsely identified another suspect from the lineup, and 27% said that the suspect was not present (miss). Skin tone and broadness of nose were associated with the highest false identification rates for both the Black and White robber. Skin and fullness of lips were associated with the highest miss rates for both the Black and White robber. False identifications were lower for the Black robber when participants did not mention any stereotypical features than when they did.

There were more false identifications for the Black robber ($n=16$) than the White robber ($n=5$). There were also more "misses" for the Black robber ($n=34$) than the White robber ($n=6$). Along with the higher number of stereotypical features for the Black robber, the results align with those of Kleider et al., 2012. White people with perceived stereotypical features are less likely to be falsely identified than Black people with stereotypical black features. This could indicate that false identifications disproportionately affect black people in general, not only due to stereotypical features. Future studies should include further analysis to find the significance between specific stereotypical features and misidentification rates.

References

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