How Black Are You?:
The Influence of Racial Centrality on Stereotype Threat in the Courtroom

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Introduction

Within the U.S. criminal justice system, discrimination based on **stereotypes** contributes to significant racial disparities:

- *Approximately 40% of individuals that are incarcerated in federal, state, or local prisons and jails are Black.*
- *The discretion of legal actions, such as judges, lawyers, and jury members, allow for discrimination to enter the courtroom.*

- Black people are aware of the Black criminality stereotype are are concerned about being perceived this way (Sigelman, 1997).

- Meta-perception is the focal point of **stereotype threat**, which is when an individual belonging to a stereotyped group feels they are at risk of confirming stereotypes about their social group (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The anxiety of wanting to disconfirm the stereotype about themselves and their group leads to individuals confirming the stereotype.

- **Racial centrality**, the degree to which one identifies with their race, influences how individuals perceive themselves and affects how they appraise stereotypes toward their racial group and perceive discrimination.

In the present study we explore the nonverbal manifestations of **stereotype threat,** and **how racial centrality** influences stereotype threat

We ask: Can stereotype threat be observed through non-verbal behaviors? Is racial centrality a moderator for stereotype threat?

Hypotheses

We anticipate that activating the stereotype of Black criminality will cause Black individuals to be perceived as more guilty (stereotype threat)

- Black individuals in the stereotype threat condition will experience more stereotype threat and be perceived more guilty as indicated by higher coder ratings of Guilt than the control condition.

- Black individuals that rate higher in racial centrality will experience more stereotype threat than those with low racial centrality as indicated by higher coder ratings of Guilt.

- Black individuals in the stereotype threat condition that rate higher in racial centrality will experience the most stereotype threat, as indicated by higher coder ratings of Guilt

Method

Participants:

- 80 Black female students from Loyola University Chicago*

*We are still currently in the recruitment stage of our research and aim to obtain 80 participants

Procedure (Part 1)

- A racial centrality measure will be embedded in the participant recruitment materials.
  Racial Identity/Centrality Scale
  •An abridged version of the Multidimensional Model of Black Identity (MMBI) (Sellers et al., 1997). (14 items).
  - Racial Centrality (e.g. "In general, being Black is an important part of my self-image") (8 items)
  - Private Regard (e.g. "I am proud to be Black") (3 items)
  - Public Regard (e.g. "Overall, Blacks are considered good by others") (3 items)
- Participants will be on a Zoom call with an experimenter and will be given a Qualtrics link to the experiment materials and instructions. The Qualtrics will randomly assign participants to either a stereotype activation or control condition.

Stereotype Activation Condition
- Participants will read a demographic survey that will prime them to think of their racial identity prior to reading a newspaper article regarding a drug crime (activating Black criminality stereotype) with a picture of a Black perpetrator.

Control Condition
- Participants will read a newspaper article regarding a drug crime with a picture of a White perpetrator.

Hypothetical Legal Scenario
- Participants told they are on trial for theft at a local Target.
- They will read the details of the crime including details they can use to defend themselves. The crime is a felony, and they could serve 2-5 years in prison
- Participants told they must give a statement of defense that will be recorded and shown to future participants who will decide their guilty status. (3-5 minute video)
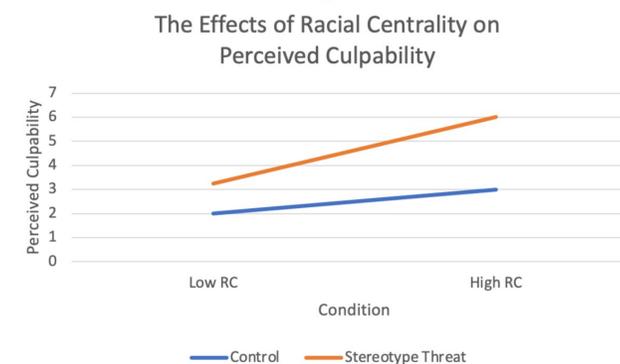
Procedure (Part 2)

Guilt/Culpability
- White mock-jurors gathered from SONA will watch the Black participants' statements of defense and rate how guilty/culpable they believe the individual in the video to be based on non-verbal behaviors.
- The coders will complete a 7-point Likert scale to assess perceived culpability (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) (e.g. Based on the nonverbal behaviors you saw in the video, to what extent do you agree the individual in the video is guilty of the crime?")

Predicted Results

- We predict that, regardless of one's racial identity centrality, Black participants in the stereotype threat activation condition will be perceived as more guilty by White mock-jurors compared to Black participants in the stereotype threat condition compared to the control condition

- Further, We predict that, regardless of which experimental condition they receive there will be a main effect of racial identity centrality such that Black participants that score higher on racial identity centrality will be perceived as more culpable compared to those lower in racial centrality.

- Finally, we predict an interaction effect such that, Black individuals that rate higher in racial centrality and are in the stereotype threat activation condition will be perceived as the most guilty in comparison to all other participants . We believe this will be due to the fact their central identity will lead them to be particularly aware of the activation of the stereotype associated with their identity.

The Effects of Racial Centrality on Perceived Culpability

We are still currently in the recruitment phase of this experiment and expect to conduct the study in the beginning of May.

Discussion

The current study will be adding to the limited body of research regarding stereotype threat in the legal context, and it is also one of the few studies to investigate the relationship between stereotype threat and nonverbal behaviors. This study will be the first to explore empirically the potential for racial identity centrality to serve as a moderator of stereotype threat.

These findings have the potential to expand the process by which we understand how bias against Black Americans emerges within the criminal justice system. The findings of this study have the potential to outline how identity characteristics of minorities on trial may influence trial outcomes.

In connecting juror's punishment decisions to the non-verbal anxiety expressed by Black defendants, this work in no way intends to blame the victim or suggest that systemic biases in punishment result from Black defendants' own behavior. This study's main goal is to address how Black individuals exist in a legal system that is biased against them and expect the worst outcome whenever they interact with this biased legal system.

References

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