Examining the Role of Racial Identity on Perceptions of Crime

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Background

Public perceptions of race and the associated stereotypes have recently become a popular topic in both psychology and the media. Specifically, the treatment of African Americans by the American justice system and police.

Although African Americans have statistically higher levels of criminal records compared to whites, and have previously been six times more likely to face time in prison (West and Sabol, 2009), recent research heavily implies that racial profiling and discrimination from American police is present (Voigt et al., 2017). African Americans have also been sentenced to longer prison time for the same or lesser crime than whites, even with a shorter criminal record (Warren, Chiricos and Bales, 2012). These statistics are thought to be due to negative stereotyping based on race, such as perceived violence and threatening behaviour from African Americans.

This study aims to investigate the direct relationship between race and perceived criminal activity in the general public. We hypothesize that the higher the perceived number of African Americans, the higher the amount of perceived crime, consistent with Quillian and Pager (2001). In contrast, perceived white majority populations are predicted to be associated with lower levels of perceived crime. We will also examine the role of the participants' own race in their perceptions, which is less widely researched.

Methods

620 participants (*Mean age*= 47.58, *SD*= 16.76) completed the study as part of a large-scale online questionnaire regarding charitable donations to victims of relatively unknown cities.

Part One: Eight photos of victims and an associated audio storyline were displayed. Two treatment conditions were included: mostly white or mostly black simulated residents. Race was the defining feature of the photo, with other extraneous variables controlled for. Participants were not informed of any true information regarding the town or residents.

The audiovisual presentation contained two photo manipulations (race itself and whether race was shown or hidden, shown in Figure 1) and which city was they belonged to. All participants viewed randomized versions of the same experiment.

Part Two: Participants' race were divided into categories: white (*N*=372), black (*N*=148), Hispanic (*N*=68), other non-Hispanic (*N*=7) or 2+ races non-Hispanic (*N*=25).

Participants were asked:

"As your best guess, what percentage of recipients of [CHARITY] in [TOWN] are: [White]?"

"As your best guess, what percentage of recipients of [CHARITY] in [TOWN] are: [African American]?"

"As your best guess, what percentage of recipients of [CHARITY] in [TOWN] have a criminal record?"

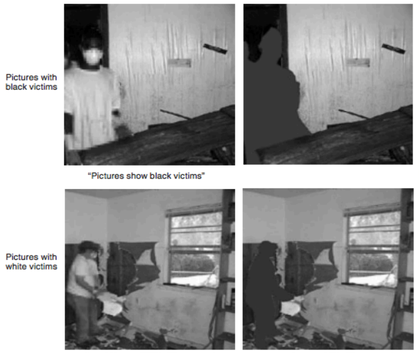

Figure 1. The Picture Manipulations

Results

In support of our hypothesis, cities perceived to have a larger number of African Americans were significantly positively correlated with higher levels of perceived crime overall; r =.147, p=<.001 (Figure 2). An ANCOVA, holding participants' own race constant, was consistent with this; $F(36, 461)=1.72$, p=.007.

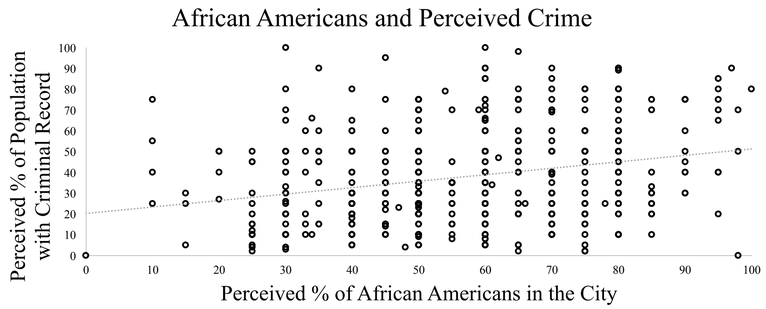

Figure 2. Scatterplot showing the correlation between perceived amount of African Americans and crime; r = .256, p = < .001.

Furthermore, cities with a perceived high level of white residents were negatively correlated with high levels of perceived crime; r =- .170, p=<.001 (Figure 3). A further ANCOVA found this to be true; $F(33, 464)=1.5$, p=.04, also whilst holding the participants' own race constant.

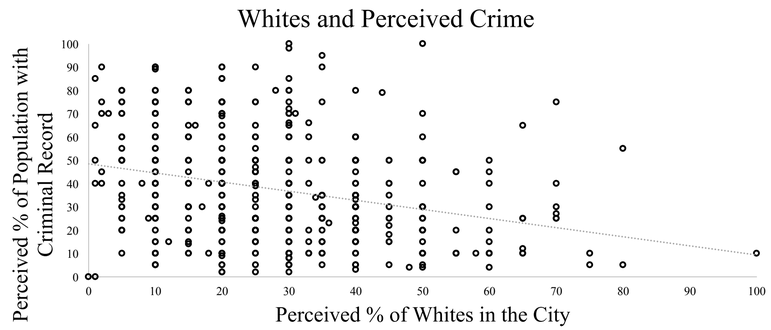

Figure 3. Scatterplot showing the correlation between perceived amount of Whites and crime; r = -.277, p = < .001.

However, when analysing racial groups independently, only white participants showed the significant trend between perceived white majority cities and low levels of crime; $F(26, 278)=185.95$, p=.04. No other racial group displayed these perceptions.

In contrast, high levels of perceived crime in African American cities were only statistically significant in the African American participants; $F(24,91)=1.71$, p=.04. No other racial group displayed a significant relationship between African Americans and crime.

Unfortunately, we did not examine the other three racial groups due to small sample sizes.

Discussion

The findings of this study support our hypotheses and are consistent with previous literature (Quillian and Pager, 2001). Levels of perceived crime were significantly higher for African Americans, whereas low levels of perceived crime were significantly lower for whites. The results strongly support the presence of racially based stereotyping.

Interestingly, the results were dependent on the participants' own race. In contrast to the findings of Duncan (1976), it was not whites that displayed negative racial stereotyping against African Americans. Our findings show that participants displayed strong racial biases towards their own ethnic group only. White participants believed their racial group to be low in criminal activity, whereas African Americans believed their racial group to be high, which were the only significant findings upon split file analyses.

If African Americans do have negative perceptions of crime based on their race, it may indicate a more personal issue of identify, rather than a social and political view ingrained in all populations, inconsistent with the more widespread view. It is also possible that the knowledge of the justice system, addressed previously (Warren, Chiricos and Bales, 2012), led participants to answer in this way. Future research should attempt to investigate these personal views in black and white participants in more depth.

It is important to make light of these findings to highlight racial stereotyping within the population, specifically African Americans' perception of themselves. In order to make social change, this should be addressed as well as issues within the justice system specifically, which can mirror public perceptions on race, as shown in this study.

References

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