Case Report

Bias at the intersection of identity: Conflicting social stereotypes of gender and race augment the perceived femininity and interpersonal warmth of smiling Black women

Erin Cooley*, Hannah Winslow, Andrew Vojt, Jonathan Shein, Jennifer Ho

Colgate University, United States

ABSTRACT

Research indicates that Black women are socially ignored given that they are neither the prototypical Black person nor the prototypical woman. We build from augmentation principle to propose that factors that increase the salience of Black women's gender identity may lead to particularly positive social expectations given countervailing associations of Blackness/threat. First, Study 1 demonstrates that smiles increase the salience of Black women's gender identity as indicated by fewer categorization errors in a speeded gender categorization task. Next, Study 2 demonstrates that, consistent with augmentation principle, the expression of a smile increases the perceived femininity of a Black woman to a greater degree than a smile expressed by a White woman. Moreover, smiles increase positive expectations for an interaction with a Black woman more so than they do for a White woman. We conclude that Black women navigate a precarious balance between social invisibility and social hypervisibility based on shifts in the salience of their gender identity.

When trying to understand people's lived experiences, attitudes toward race cannot be isolated from attitudes toward the myriad intersecting identities that people have. However, psychological research examining racial prejudice toward Black people often focuses on attitudes toward Black men. Similarly, research examining sexism often focuses on attitudes toward White women (Cole, 2009; Goff & Kahn, 2013; Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Thus, researchers often ignore the experiences of Black women who are neither the prototypical Black person nor the prototypical woman (Goff et al., 2008; Hooks, 1981; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

The fact that Black women are relatively ignored within the literature on racial prejudice is mirrored by their experiences in daily interactions. Sesko and Biernat (2010) found that the faces of Black women, as well as their statements within a group conversation, were less likely to be remembered than faces or statements made by Black men or White people of either gender. This distinct prejudice experienced by Black women has been termed "intersectional invisibility" (Beale, 1970; Crenshaw, 1991; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) and is thought to be driven by the fact that Black women are neither the default when people imagine women, nor the default when people imagine Black people (Goff et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Thomas, Dovidio, & West, 2014). Consistent with this reasoning, people experience greater difficulty in categorizing Black women than White

women according to their gender; and greater difficulty in categorizing Black women than Black men according to their race (Goff et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2014). While these data indicate that the dual identities of Black women can lead them to experience social isolation, might there also be circumstances in which the dual identities of Black women lead them to be sought out socially?

In some ways, the experiences of Black women are likely to be similar to the experiences of Black men given their shared racial identity. For example, both male (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014) and female (Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, & Salter, 2017) Black children are perceived as older and less innocent than their White peers—with tragic implications for their legal treatment (Epstein, Blake, & González, 2017). Similarly, Black women are often stereotyped as high in agency and strength, much like Black men (Donovan & West, 2015; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016). However, unlike Black men, Black women simultaneously navigate conflicting gender stereotypes that emphasize warmth and social approachability (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Because these race and gender stereotypes are in direct conflict with one another, they may make behaviors that are consistent with one of these identities (e.g., a behavior that emphasizes femininity) seem particularly diagnostic of a Black woman's general social disposition. Such a prediction is consistent with classic work on attribution theory (Duncan, 1976; Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980)—most notably,

augmentation principle (Kelley, 1971).

Augmentation principle predicts that behaviors that occur despite some countervailing force are perceived as particularly diagnostic of an underlying disposition (Kelley, 1971). For example, if a woman makes a generous donation, people perceive that behavior as more meaningful when they learn that she also had the opportunity to invest the money in a lucrative fund (i.e., a countervailing force) than when this alluring alternative was not available (Kruglanski, Schwartz, Maides, & Hamel, 1978). Applying this reasoning to the social experiences of Black women, behaviors stereotypically associated with femininity, when enacted by a Black woman, may accentuate her gender identity and associated gender stereotypes. If so, attributions associated with femininity—such as interpersonal warmth—may be augmented given countervailing stereotypes that link Blackness to masculinity and threat (Goff et al., 2008; Shields, 2008).

Building from this logic, we propose that behaviors—such as the flash of a smile—that accentuate the gender identity of Black women may play an important role in the types of expectations non-Black people have for interactions with Black women. We chose facial expressions as a manipulation of gender salience because of the strong association of smiles with femininity and because facial expressions are a frequent social cue (Ekman, 2001; Jack, Sun, Delis, Garrod, & Schyns, 2016) that play an important role in interracial perception (Kunstman, Tuscherer, Trawalter, & Lloyd, 2016; Lloyd, Kunstman, Tuscherer, & Bernstein, 2017). First, in Study 1, we reasoned that smiles (versus neutral facial expressions) would accentuate the gender identity of Black women as indicated by fewer errors in a speeded gender categorization task. Next, in Study 2 we hypothesized that if smiles accentuate Black women's gender identity, smiles should also increase the perceived femininity of Black women to a greater degree than White women given conflicting stereotypes associating Blackness with masculinity (i.e., an augmentation effect). Finally, given associations of femininity with interpersonal warmth, we predicted that this augmentation effect may lead to preferences for interactions with Black (versus White) women—but only when Black women are smiling. All measures are disclosed. Data and materials for all studies are available upon request.

1. Study 1 method

Previous research indicates that people struggle to categorize Black women (who are expressing neutral facial expressions) by gender in speeded categorization tasks due to stereotypes associating Blackness with masculinity (Thomas et al., 2014). In Study 1, we tested whether the expression of smiles facilitates categorization of Black women by their gender. To test this, participants completed two speeded categorization tasks: one for race and one for gender. We predicted that there would be more errors categorizing Black women by gender than race when they had neutral expressions. However, when expressing smiles, we expected categorization of Black women by gender to be facilitated (i.e., fewer errors).

1.1. Participants

We recruited a sample of 100 students from our psychology participant pool based on a power analysis (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) that indicated that we needed a sample of 92 to have adequate power (1-β ≥ .80) to detect a small effect (f = .15) in our fully within-subjects design. Participants were 104 students (81.7% White; 3% Black; 1% Native American/Pacific Islander; 12% Asian; 1.9% Other; participants could select more than one option) who completed the study for course credit. Given our interest in interracial perception of Black people, we conducted all analyses on the 100 non-Black participants (24 men, 75 women, 1 other).

1.2. Procedure

After signing an informed consent, participants were told that they were going to engage in a concentration task. The stimulus set contained 24 photos each of Black women, Black men, White women, and White men. For each stimulus, we obtained two photos, one with the person expressing a smile and one with the person expressing a neutral expression for a total of 192 photos. Photos were selected from the Chicago Face Database (CFD 2.0; Ma & Wittenbrink, 2015) and closely matched (based on CFD norming data) on attractiveness ($M_{BlackWomen}$ = 3.33, SD = 1.36; $M_{WhiteWomen}$ = 3.33, SD = 1.31; $M_{BlackMen}$ = 3.32, SD = 1.43; $M_{WhiteMen}$ = 3.29, SD = 1.37).

The method for the categorization tasks was derived from previous research (Thomas et al., 2014). In the gender categorization task, participants categorized the target photos by gender ("man" or "woman"); in the race categorization task, participants categorized the same photos by race ("White" or "Black"). Participants made categorizations by pressing the "Q" and "P" computer keys, and the order of the two tasks was counterbalanced. For each categorization task, participants completed 8 practice trials and then 96 critical trials composed of 12 smiling photos and 12 neutral photos of each photo type (i.e., Black women, Black men, White women, White men) in a random order. Participants were told to respond as quickly and accurately as possible. Participants were also randomly assigned to one of two stimuli conditions so that no individual saw the same face both smiling and neutral, but across participants all faces appeared with a smiling and neutral facial expression. Participants concluded by reporting demographic information, explicit racial attitudes (Sears & Henry, 2002), a measure of the degree to which they prioritize positivity (Catalino, Algoe, & Fredrickson, 2014), and motivations to control prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998). Results were not moderated by any of these scales (see Supplementary Materials).

1.3. Results and discussion

We predicted that smiles (versus neutral expressions) would facilitate categorization of Black women by gender, as indicated by fewer categorization errors. To test our hypotheses, we ran a 2 (Target Race: Black vs. White) × 2 (Target Gender: woman vs. man) × 2 (Target Facial Expression: smile vs. neutral) × 2 (Categorization Dimension: gender vs. race) repeated-measures ANOVA. Overall there were two main effects, a three-way interaction, and the predicted four-way interaction. First, there was a main effect of target gender such that non-Black people made more errors categorizing women (M = .038, 95% CI [.031, .045]) than men (M = .031, 95% CI [.026, .037], F(1, 99) = 5.66, p = .019, η_p^2 = .05. Additionally, there was a main effect of categorization dimension, such that non-Black people made more errors when categorizing gender (M = .038, 95% CI [.032, .044]) than race (M = .032, 95% CI [.032, .044]), F(1, 99) = 6.58, p = .012, η_p^2 = .06. There was also an unpredicted three-way interaction of Target Race × Target Gender × Categorization Dimension, F(1, 99) = 6.09, p = .015, η_p^2 = .06. Critically, this three-way interaction was qualified by the predicted four-way interaction of Target Race × Target Gender × Target Facial Expression × Categorization Dimension, F(1, 99) = 5.29, p = .024, η_p^2 = .05.

We next probed the predicted four-way interaction by running separate 2 (Target Gender: woman vs. man) × 2 (Target Facial Expression: smile vs. neutral) × 2 (Categorization Dimension: gender vs. race) repeated-measures ANOVAs for Black and White targets. For White targets, this analysis revealed no significant main effects, no two-way interactions, nor a three-way interaction (see Supplementary Materials). For Black targets, however, there were two main effects, two two-way interactions, and the predicted three-way Target Gender × Target Facial Expression × Categorization Dimension interaction, F(1, 99) = 6.49, p = .012, η_p^2 = .06 (see Supplementary Materials for all descriptives). We next probed this three-way