



Reports

Selectively friending: Racial stereotypicality and social rejection

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ABSTRACT

Three studies show that people whose physical features are seen as more (versus less) racially stereotypical are more vulnerable to social rejection and exclusion from those outside their group. In Study 1, which used an online social networking site, Blacks perceived as more physically stereotypical were found to have fewer non-Black friends, compared to less-stereotypical Blacks. In Study 2, which used an experimental paradigm, requests for friendship made to non-Blacks by more-stereotypical Blacks were more likely to be rejected than those made by less-stereotypical Blacks. Finally, in a college dormitory, people judged to have more (vs. less) racially stereotypical physical features were found to interact less often with outgroup members. This work substantiates a growing body of research demonstrating that people who are perceived as more physically stereotypical of their racial group are particularly vulnerable to discriminatory treatment by outgroup members across a variety of life domains.

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Introduction

A visible stigma, such as membership in a racial minority group, can have significant negative consequences for a person's life outcomes, well-being, and daily interactions with others, as shown by an abundance of research over many decades (e.g., Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). Recent scholarship, however, has added to the complexity of this approach by demonstrating that negative outcomes are experienced to unequal degrees by members of the same minority group. Specifically, racial minorities who are perceived as more physically stereotypical or prototypical of their group are more vulnerable to negative outcomes, compared to less-stereotypical minorities. In other words, visible minorities face feature-based as well as category-based discrimination (Maddox, 2004). In the case of Blacks, stereotypical features include a darker skin tone and broader nose and lips (Blair, Judd, Sadler, & Jenkins, 2002; Brooks & Gwinn, 2010); for Hispanics, they include a darker skin tone and more indigenous-appearing features (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002). White stereotypicality appears to involve lighter skin, lighter hair and eyes, and a thinner nose (Ma & Correll, 2011; Ronquillo et al., 2007); for Asians, darker hair, smaller eyes, and larger cheeks (Mok, 1998; Wilkins, Chan, & Kaiser, 2011).

Individuals perceived as more (versus less) stereotypical of their ethnic or racial group are the recipients of more negative affect or bias (Ito, Willadsen-Jensen, Kaye, & Park, 2011; Livingston & Brewer, 2002; Ronquillo et al., 2007; Uhlmann et al., 2002) and are viewed in more stereotypical trait terms (Blair, 2006; Blair, Chapleau, & Judd, 2005; Blair, Judd, & Fallman, 2004; Blair, et al., 2002; Maddox & Gray, 2002). Stereotypes linking Blacks and crime are particularly problematic; Blacks perceived as more stereotypical are more likely to be judged violent or criminal (Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Kahn & Davies, 2010), even by police officers (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). They also are more likely to receive long prison sentences – and even the death penalty (Blair, Judd, & Chapleau, 2004; Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006). Indeed, sociologists have suggested that the difference in life outcomes (such as economic or educational attainment) between Blacks perceived as more versus less stereotypical is at least as large as that between Blacks and Whites (Hill, 2000; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991).

However, despite this recent growth of research exploring the consequences for minorities of within-group phenotypic variability, little is known about the role that this phenomenon plays in everyday social interactions. That is, what are the experiences of individuals perceived as more versus less physically stereotypical in interacting with those outside their group? In the present studies, we investigate the role of racial stereotypicality in social acceptance and rejection, looking at social decision making in real-life communities.

Research on friendship and social interaction across racial group lines demonstrates that both majority-group and minority-group members anticipate interracial interactions with significant anxiety

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and distress (Richeson & Shelton, 2007). Majority-group members typically fear that they will be viewed as prejudiced, and also (incorrectly) assume a lack of interest in friendship on the part of their minority-group interaction partners, who meanwhile fear they will be the targets of racial prejudice (Goff, Steele, & Davies, 2008; Plant, 2004; Shelton & Richeson, 2005). As a result of these anxious expectations, relatively cold non-verbal behaviors are mutually expressed, with the consequence being poorer relational outcomes relative to comparable same-race interactions (Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2006).

Expecting intergroup interactions to go poorly, both majority- and minority-group members tend to avoid them; it is therefore not surprising that racial homophily persists in a variety of social contexts (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Here, we hypothesize that these trends will be exacerbated as a function of physical stereotypicality. That is, we expect that people perceived to have a more-stereotypical appearance will experience more social rejection from outgroup members than will those judged to be less stereotypical.

This hypothesis is tested in three studies exploring real social communities. In Study 1, we investigated the network size of Blacks who use an online social networking site, hypothesizing that Blacks perceived as more stereotypical would have fewer non-Black friends than would less-stereotypical Blacks. This idea was further explored in Study 2 using an experimental paradigm; we hypothesized that Blacks' overtures of friendship to non-Blacks within a city-based online community would be met with more rejection when the Black initiator was more versus less stereotypical. Finally, in Study 3 we examined the strength of social ties among residents of a college dormitory, hypothesizing that individuals perceived as more stereotypical would have fewer interactions with outgroup members.

Study 1

In Study 1, we explored the relationship between perceived physical stereotypicality and friendship network size. Black Americans' photographs on Facebook, the social networking website, were coded for physical stereotypicality, and their number of friends was recorded. We predicted that more-stereotypical Blacks would have fewer non-Black Facebook friends, compared to those lower in stereotypicality. (We did not make a prediction about the relationship between physical stereotypicality and numbers of Black friends.)

Method

Participants

The participant sample comprised Black men and women who maintained personal profile pages on Facebook. To help ensure that participants would be likely to identify as Black, participant selection was limited to men and women with first names shown to occur significantly more frequently among Black than non-Black Americans (Fryer & Levitt, 2004): Darnell, DeAndre, Deshawn, Jamal, Malik, Marquis, Trevon, Tyrone, and Willie (men); and Aaliyah, Ashanti, Deja, Diamond, Ebony, Jada, Jazmin, Precious, Raven, Shanice, and Tiara (women). All participants who had one of these names, whose profile picture included a recognizable face image, and who appeared Black were added to the sample until we had an initial sample of 200. Ten participants were then excluded because their profile indicated that they lived outside the United States. This yielded a final sample of 190 (85 men and 105 women).

Coding of independent and dependent variables

Three judges rated each participant's main profile photo on Black physical stereotypicality, using a scale that ranged from 1 (definitely not stereotypical) to 4 (definitely stereotypical). Judges had access only

to photos during coding, and were blind to hypotheses. Inter-judge reliability was sufficiently high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$), so stereotypicality ratings were averaged across judges. This stereotypicality index served as the independent variable.

Next, a fourth judge visited each profile page and recorded how many Black and non-Black friends the person had (based on the friend's profile photo). These two indices (number of non-Black friends and number of Black friends) served as the dependent variables.

Coding of potential mediators

In addition, for exploratory purposes, participants' racial category memberships also were coded. Specifically, two judges indicated whether they thought the person in the photo was Black (or not)⁴, and rated their confidence in this categorization as high, medium, or low, therefore yielding a continuous scale that ranged from 1 (highly confident that the person is not Black) to 6 (highly confident that the person is Black). Further, two additional judges indicated whether they thought the person in the photo was Asian, Latino, or White (i.e., a group other than Black, abbreviated here as ALW) or not ALW, and rated their confidence in this categorization as high, medium, or low, therefore yielding a continuous scale that ranged from 1 (highly confident that the person is not Asian, Latino, or White) to 6 (highly confident that the person is ALW). Inter-judge reliability was sufficiently high, so ratings were averaged across judges to create a Black category confidence index ($\alpha = .90$) and an ALW category confidence index ($\alpha = .78$). These indices were highly but not perfectly correlated ($r = -.62$).

Results

Four participants' total friend counts were more than two standard deviations above the sample mean (> 1876 friends). These participants were excluded from analysis⁵ as unrepresentative of typical Facebook users.

We hypothesized that Blacks judged to be more physically stereotypical would have fewer non-Black (outgroup) friends than would less-stereotypical Blacks. We also looked at Black (ingroup) friends for comparison. Following the methods of Judd, McClelland, and Smith (1996) for within-subjects moderated regression, we first regressed the stereotypicality index on the difference between the number of Black and non-Black friends each participant had. This term was significant, $\beta = .29, p < .005$, indicating that friend race moderated the effect of stereotypicality on numbers of friends. Follow-up analyses revealed that, as predicted, Black stereotypicality was negatively associated with numbers of non-Black friends, $\beta = -.32, p < .005$. Moreover, Black stereotypicality was positively and marginally associated with numbers of Black friends, $\beta = .17, p = .051$.

We also explored the Black and ALW category confidence ratings as potential mediators of the relationship between stereotypicality and number of non-Black friends, to gain further insight into this relationship. Not surprisingly, Black stereotypicality was positively related to Black category confidence, $\beta = .53, p < .005$, and negatively related to ALW category confidence, $\beta = -.53, p < .005$. Analyses using bootstrapping methods (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007) showed that when Black category confidence was tested as a potential mediator, the 95% confidence interval ($-29.49, 14.32$) included 0, indicating no mediation. However, when ALW category confidence was tested as a potential mediator, the 95% confidence interval

⁴ Three participants were rated by both judges as unlikely to be Black. Excluding these participants did not affect significance levels of the reported analyses. They were retained in order to include the full range of the Black category confidence index in the subsequent mediation analyses.

⁵ Excluding these participants did not affect significance levels.

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