Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 46 (2010) 356–360

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Report

Prototypes of race and gender: The invisibility of Black women

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 20 August 2009
Revised 22 October 2009
Available online 1 November 2009

Keywords:
Stereotyping
Prejudice
Gender
Race

ABSTRACT

Research on racial and gender stereotyping typically focuses on the role of one of these social categories at a time rather than race/gender combinations. We suggest that the relative *non-prototypicality* of Black women's race and gender results in their "invisibility" relative to White women and to Black and White men (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Two studies address whether Black women go "unnoticed" and their voices "unheard," by examining memory for Black women's faces and speech contributions. We found that photos of Black women were least likely to be recognized (Study 1), and statements said by a Black woman in a group discussion were least likely to be correctly attributed (Study 2) compared to Black men and White women and White men. The importance and implications of invisibility as a unique form of discrimination are discussed.

Introduction

As a discipline, social psychology has been dedicated to studying racial and gender stereotyping and prejudice. However, the majority of research investigates *Black men* as targets of racism, and *White women* as targets of sexism, disregarding members of groups belonging to multiple-subordinate-group identities, such as Black women. Despite their rarity in laboratory studies of stereotyping, there has been some debate in the literature on the issue of whether Black women experience relative disadvantage or advantage due to their unique dual subordinate category membership.

The prominent theory arguing in favor of disadvantage is the "double jeopardy" hypothesis, which posits a "double hit" of racism and sexism (Beale, 1970). From this perspective, Black women are assumed to be worse off than White women and Black men because they are subject to both racism and sexism (Epstein, 1973; Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990; Settles, 2006). Data supporting this hypothesis have been sparse and inconclusive, and only recently have researchers begun to empirically offer and test alternatives (e.g., Levin, Sinclair, Veniegas, & Taylor, 2002; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000; see also Kang & Chasteen, 2009). One such alternative to double jeopardy is the *subordinate-male target hypothesis* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which argues that Black males, rather than Black females, are primary objects of discrimination. Another is the *ethnic-prominence hypothesis* (Levin et al., 2002), which suggests that race trumps gender, such that women of color are more likely to experience discrimination because of their race than because of their gender.

Other relevant research has been descriptive, providing evidence that stereotypes of Black women differ from those of White women and Black men. For example, relative to White women, Black women tend to be viewed as more "masculine" (self-reliant, independent, assertive, strong) and less "feminine" (emotional, passive, dependent; Binion, 1990; Landrine, 1985; Robinson, 1983; West, 1995). And while some stereotypes of Black women are consistent with those of Black men (lazy, hostile, uneducated), others are in opposition to these stereotypes (see Niemann, Jennings, Rozelle, Baxter, & Sullivan, 1994).

These findings about differential stereotypes suggest that Black women are neither prototypical of "women" nor of "Blacks" (also see Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) and this *non-prototypicality hypothesis* guides the present research. The extent to which a group member or stimulus is prototypical of its category has been shown to affect basic categorization and memory processes (Rosch, 1975). For example, non-prototypical category members are less likely to be recognized than prototypical stimuli (Cantor & Mischel, 1977; Posner & Keele, 1968; Posner & Keele, 1970), are less quickly identified as members of the category (Ellis & Nelson, 1999), and are recalled later than prototypical members in a free recall paradigm (Silvera, Krull, & Sassler, 2002). In line with expected outcomes of being a non-prototypical group member (e.g., Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981), some research has suggested that perceivers are less efficient in categorizing Black women than White women and Black men. For example, Zárate and Smith (1990) found that White participants categorized Black targets more slowly than White targets (by race and gender), but especially when the targets were Black women (Study 2).

In addition to differential stereotype content and slower categorization, we argue that another symptom of non-prototypicality is the "invisibility" of Black women (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008;

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doi:10.1016/j.jesp.2009.10.016

Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Invisibility is typically defined as an absence of, or erroneous representations of, oppressed groups and/or individuals (Fryberg & Townsend, 2008). We define it here as a *lack of individuation* of or *lack of differentiation* between group members, which is evident in Black women's faces going "unnoticed" (being poorly recognized), and their voices going "unheard" (i.e., misattributed to others), relative to those of White women and Black and White men. Importantly, we are not suggesting that Black women are *literally invisible*, such that they are literally not seen and literally not heard. Much research suggests that gender, race, and age are quickly encoded and used in judgments upon encountering individuals (Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1988; Devine, 1989; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Talyor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978), and thus we assume that when a Black woman enters a room, perceivers can readily "see" her. Instead, we suggest that Black women's faces are less readily distinguished from each other, a prediction we examine in Study 1, and that their contributions to a group discussion are more readily misattributed (Study 2).

The idea that Black women are "invisible" has long been a theme in feminist writings (Bell, 1992; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; King, 1988), and has appeared in recent theoretical work as well (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Describing the experiences of individuals with multiple-subordinate-group identities (such as Black women), Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) suggest that these individuals experience "intersectional invisibility" and are subject to *different* outcomes than their more prototypical counterparts – both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage is that Black women may be less likely to be targets of discrimination than more prototypical members (Black men; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, a disadvantage is that non-prototypical subordinate group members struggle to be visible and have their voices heard, and are thus more likely to be marginalized. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) discuss invisibility predominantly in terms of the *experiences* of Black women. However, embedded in this analysis is the assumption that individual belonging to multiple-subordinate-group identities are *perceived* by others as non-prototypical group members and thus are subject to outcomes related to invisibility. Our work focuses on this end of the analysis, and investigates whether, in fact, Black women are "invisible" to Whites.

In Study 1 we hypothesized that White perceivers would be less successful in recognizing Black women's faces compared to those of Black men, White women, and White men. We adapted Shepard's (1967) basic memory paradigm by exposing participants to a series of photos depicting Black/White women and men. In a second phase they were shown the same photos along with foils and were asked simply to indicate "yes" if they saw the photo before, or "no" if they had not. We hypothesized that participants would be the least sensitive (in signal detection terms, correctly distinguishing between a 'new' and 'old' faces) in identifying Black women compared to the other groups. In Study 2, we use a "who said what" paradigm (Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978) to investigate memory for the speech contributions of Black women. We expected Black women to be implicated in more memory errors, such that their contributions would be misattributed more often than those of any other group.

Study 1

Method

Participants and design

Participants were 131 White undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course who received course credit for their time (50 females; age, $M = 18.93$, $SD = 1.16$). Participants were run alone or in pairs; each was seated at an individual computer. Participants were exposed to faces and later completed a recognition memory test. The face manipulations produced a 2 (target race: Black, White) × 2 (target gender: female, male), within-subjects design. Participant gender was also examined as a potential moderator but as it produced no effects it will not be discussed further.

Table 1
Hits, false alarms, sensitivity and bias, Study 1.

	Black women	White women	Black men	White men
Hits	.71 (.18)	.73 (.19)	.72 (.17)	.75 (.16)
False alarms	.20 (.16)	.15 (.14)	.17 (.15)	.17 (.14)
d'	1.64 (.83)	1.90 (.80)	1.76 (.78)	1.85 (.81)
β	.30 (.69)	.40 (.75)	.36 (.72)	.28 (.67)

Note: Numbers for hits and false alarms are proportions; standard deviations are in parentheses.

Materials

Fifty-six photos (14 of each gender/race category) were selected from a bank of headshots created by Nosek and Banaji (2001). Each photo depicted a close up head shot of a person looking straight ahead smiling with a blue background. In order to avoid particularly distinctive faces (those that might stand out in crowd or be particularly memorable; Brandt, Macrae, Schloerscheidt, & Milne, 2003) and to equate faces on attractiveness, a separate sample of 10 participants rated each potential photo on distinctiveness (1 = typical to 7 = distinctive) and attractiveness (1 = not all attractive to 7 = very attractive). Those selected for this study were judged roughly average on both dimensions (both $Ms = 3.68$), and Target Race × Target Gender repeated measures ANOVAs showed that distinctiveness and attractiveness did not differ across the race and gender categories (all Fs *ns*).

Procedure

Participants were told we were interested in memory for faces during the process of first impressions and were then paced through the procedure on computers using MediaLab software (Jarvis, 2006). In phase 1, participants viewed 32 photos (eight of each gender/race group); each presented for 2 s, followed by a red X in the center of the screen. Photos were presented in one of three random orders for each participant. After completing phase 1, participants completed a filler task in which they were asked to list as many cities as they could think of in 3 min. In phase 2, participants were shown the same 32 photos they had seen before along with 24 new foils (six of each gender/race group). Participants were asked to indicate if the photo was "new" or "old" (Shepard, 1967). Three different fixed order conditions were created, each involving a randomized order of photos and mixing of photos between the first and second (foil) phases.

Results

Participants had a 78.3% accuracy rate overall (M errors = 12.15 out of 56 identifications, $SD = 4.73$). We first computed hits and false alarms (see Table 1),[1] then used signal detection analysis to calculate a sensitivity index or d' ($z_{\text{hits}} - z_{\text{false alarms}}$) which captures the extent to which participants distinguish between new and old faces (higher values = more sensitive), and a bias index, β, which

[1] To be able to compute proportions in cases when no errors were made, we followed conventions and changed false alarm rates of 0–.05 (this affected 225 cases [out of 131 participants × 4 types of targets = 524 possible]). Also per convention, perfect hit rates were changed to .95 (affecting 73 cases; see Wickens, 2002).