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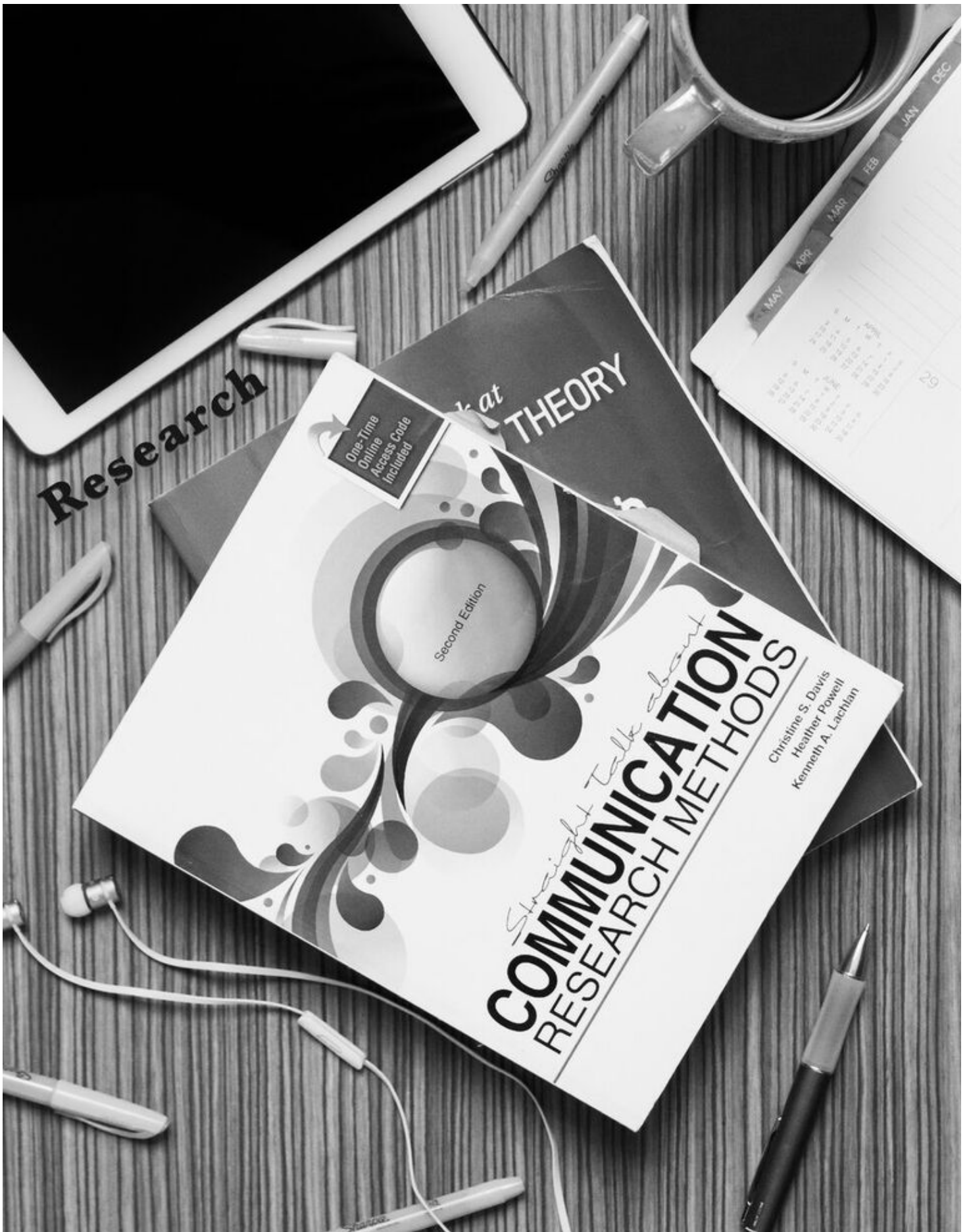
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## **The Role of Media Framing in Crime Reports: How Different Types of News Frames and Racial Identity Affect Viewers' Perceptions of Race**

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*Assigned in COM 300: Introduction to Communication Research (Dr. Theresa de los Santos)*

### **Abstract**

This experiment examined how racial identity and different types of media frames affect viewer's perceptions of suspects of criminal acts and the entire racial group to which the suspect belongs. After reading a randomly selected mock-up news crime article, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed their attitudes towards the suspect and the suspect's race as a whole. The articles showed either a black suspect or a white suspect that was framed in terms of sympathy or scrutiny, creating four possible conditions. The findings indicate that people who read a scrutinizing news frame have more blame for the suspect and more negative feelings towards the suspect's race as a whole. Results also revealed that participants are more likely to be sympathetic towards a suspect when they share the same racial identity.

*Keywords:* race, media priming, media framing, social identity theory.

Consumers of mass media are bombarded with ideas about various racial groups due to the power that mass media holds to create, enforce, and reproduce stereotypes and racial ideologies (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). Stereotyping, at its basis, is not bad, as it is an attempt to generalize in order to make sense of a complicated environment. However, the problem arises when stereotypes are negative and are used to create false perceptions of an entire race or group of people that others perceive as true. In particular, the way that the news media frames a story affects not only the stereotypes the viewer holds in their mind, but how those stereotypes are manifested in day-to-day behaviors. When the media frames a story in a way that upholds harmful and discriminatory stereotypes, there is a greater chance that the viewer will apply those to entire groups of people (Abraham & Appiah, 2006). With recent events in history such as the Ferguson unrest, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the 2015 protests at the University of Missouri, it is more important than ever to understand the role that media plays in shaping discussions, and, consequently, attitudes about race.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how media framing affects viewers' perceptions of racial groups. Specifically, we are interested in how different framing of criminal news stories affects viewer's perceptions of both the suspect and the entire racial group of the suspect and how shared racial identity with the suspect contributes to these perceptions. Before specifically stating our hypotheses, it is necessary to review relevant bodies of literature on news coverage of different racial groups, media framing, and social identity theory.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **News Depictions of Black Americans**

Darker skin tones have consistently been associated with negative media stereotypes (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), and this pattern continues to permeate portrayals of Black Americans today. The media consistently associates Blacks as being disproportionately indignant, violent, criminal, and uneducated (Abraham & Appiah, 2006), particularly in news stories about crime. In a study by Dixon and Linz (2000) that examined two weeks worth of news coverage in Los Angeles, Blacks were more likely to be depicted as lawbreakers and less likely to be shown as law defenders compared to Whites. They were also more likely to be depicted as perpetrators rather than victims, while for Whites, the opposite was true (Dixon & Linz, 2000). In another study of local TV crime news, Entman (1992) found that Blacks are often depicted in a manner that is more dehumanizing compared to Whites. Compared to just 18% of Whites, 38% of Blacks accused of a crime were shown being restrained by a police officer, and Black suspects were more likely to be shown as being handcuffed and poorly dressed. Furthermore, while 65% of White suspects were mentioned by name, only 39% of Black suspects were mentioned by name (Entman, 1992). The result of this dehumanization is that viewers come to see Blacks as an undifferentiated group, while Whites are given individual identities (Entman, 1994).

The media also tends to over represent Blacks in the context of certain stereotypes in ways that do not reflect actual reality. For example, a study examining photographs of Blacks in Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News and World Report found of the photos related to poverty, a disproportionate amount featured Blacks subjects. In

Newsweek, 66% of the subjects in the photographs about poverty were Black, followed by 65% in Time and 53% in U.S. News. In reality, the true proportion of Blacks in poverty at the time was 29%. This same study found similar discrepancies with employment rate, homelessness, and public welfare (Gilens, 1996). Research also suggests that Black men have a greater chance of being shown as criminal suspects than actual crime statistics suggest, and the portrayal of their role in these crimes is more likely to be violent or threatening (Oliver, 2003). In fact, a study found that 84% of all crime stories with black suspects pertained to violent crime rather than nonviolent crime, compared to 71% of crime stories with white suspects (Entman, 1992).

These media depictions of Black Americans explain why Blacks are frequently associated with these negative stereotypes. Indeed, if the media consistently shows Black defendants in more police custody than Whites, it makes sense that people would develop the stereotype that Blacks are more dangerous (Entman, 1994). The same holds true for other stereotypical depictions of Blacks related to drugs, poverty, prisons, AIDS, welfare, and drug addicted babies (Entman, 1994; Martindale, 1996; Bird, 1996). When the news media pairs images of Blacks with these negative topics, it is a subtle, yet effective way of activating racial attitudes (Appiah, 2001, 2002), and media priming of these stereotypes in one context, in this case a news context, can have long-lasting effects in other areas as well (Devine, 1989; Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996).

### **Media Priming and Framing**

Media priming and framing both play a significant role in how stereotypes are activated and maintained in viewers' minds. Media priming is the idea that when a viewer is exposed to a certain stimulus, this stimulus primes or triggers ideas in the viewer's mind that are related to what they have just seen or heard in that stimulus (Dillman, Carpentier, Northup & Parrott, 2014). On the other hand, framing is selecting and highlighting certain features of a message as important while deemphasizing other features (Entman, 1993).

Because mass media may produce and reproduce stereotypes, "biased information inevitably becomes incorporated into 'common knowledge' or schemata that viewers form about stereotyped groups" (Ramasubramanian, 2007, p. 251). Constant exposure to biased information about certain social groups can cause people to adjust their perceptions, judgments and behaviors towards those groups to fit within stereotypical depictions (Arendt, 2013). This is especially true with racial groups. Various studies suggest that exposure to racial or ethnic stereotypes in the media can influence real-world interactions with members from these groups, usually constituting applied misconceptions and stereotypes regarding minorities (Mastro, 2003). When news reports pair stories of negative elements such as drugs, poverty and crime with photos of Blacks (Entman, 1994; Martindale, 1996; Bird, 1996), this activates and maintains those stereotypes in viewers' minds. These stereotypes are more likely to be accessible in the minds of all viewers because they are so frequently activated within media (Devine, 1989).

Media framing has a similar effect as media priming in that it can affect how people perceive members of a certain group, particularly with regards to crime. For example, media messages concerning crime have the ability to shape public opinion of both the crime itself and the suspect. A study found that messages framed in an accusatory manner increase the likelihood that a viewer would perceive the suspect as guilty (Seate, Harwood & Blecha, 2010). This shows that the way the media frames a message can impact how the subjects from the media coverage are perceived. A study comparing news stories featuring black or white suspects found that stories featuring black suspects were less likely to include pro-defense sound bites, resulting in suggestions of the black suspects' guilt (Entman, 1992).

In this study, we are interested in how different media frames affect a viewer's perception of not only the suspect in a crime, but the perceptions of the suspect's race as a whole. Specifically, we are concerned with two types of media frames. The first is a sympathetic frame, which brings up the mental health history of a suspect, assumes the suspect is innocent and/or assumes the action of the suspect is out of character. The second is a scrutinizing frame, which brings up any criminal history of the suspect, assumes the suspect is guilty and/or does not mention family or personal background. Previous research suggests that the use of these different frames will greatly affect how the viewer perceives the story itself as well as the people involved. However, the groups with which the viewer identifies—their group membership—and whether or not the suspect belongs to these same groups are often times even stronger indicators than the type of frame used for how the viewer will perceive a story.

### **The Role of Group Membership in Response to Media Content**

Group membership is a social tool that not only affects how members perceive people inside their groups, but also affects how they perceive people outside of their groups. One theory that illustrates this phenomenon is social identity theory, which is the idea that part of a person's self-concept depends on the importance that an individual places on the groups to which they belong (Turner & Oakes, 1986). Following this idea, the stronger a

person's identification with a particular group, the more motivated that person will be to protect both the status and interest of that group (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004). In fact, ingroup members are consistently perceived and treated more positively than outgroup members, even when outgroup members are portrayed positively as well (Brewer, 1979, 1999).

An important, related aspect of social identity theory is how media portrayals of outgroups may cause ingroup members to adopt these portrayals as prototypes, which can be either positive or negative. Thus, media messages have the potential to influence the importance of group membership, contribute to viewers' perceptions of those groups, provide norms for how different groups should be treated, define a group's standing and status, and finally normalize these ideas by suggesting that they are universally accepted (McKinley, Mastro, & Warber, 2014). This previous research contributes to the idea that group membership is a powerful indicator of how viewers will perceive different media messages and, more specifically, how viewers will perceive messages regarding the groups of which they are a part and the groups of which they are not.

### Hypotheses

The previous studies and research on news depictions of Black Americans, media priming and framing, and social identity theory provide the foundation for the following hypotheses:

H1: When a crime news frame is more scrutinizing compared to sympathizing, participants will: a) have more blame for the suspect, and b) more negative feelings for and fear of the entire racial group of the criminal described in the story.

H2: When the race of the participant matches the criminal in a news story, regardless of the frame, the participant will be more sympathetic toward the criminal and his/her circumstances.

### Method

#### Participants and Procedure

A convenience sample of 62 participants (69% female) between the ages of 18 and 24 ( $M = 19.87$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) participated in this 2 (frame type)  $\times$  2 (race of suspect) experimental design study. Of the participants, 26 (42%) identified as White or Caucasian, 11 (18%) Asian or Pacific Islander, 5 (8%) as Black or African American, 9 (15%) as Hispanic or Latino. Additionally, 10 (16%) were a mix, and 1 (1.6%) preferred not to answer. Participants were Facebook friends and classmates of the researchers. Upon accessing the study through SurveyMonkey.com and agreeing to the informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. After reading the news story in their condition, all participants were given the same post-test questionnaire measuring blame for the suspect, sympathy for the suspect, and negative feelings, and fear of the entire racial group of the criminal.

#### Stimulus Materials

Each condition consisted of a fictitious news story about a violent crime (see Appendix B). The story involved a man who robbed and beat an elderly woman. The conditions differed by whether the suspect shown was black or white and whether the story sympathized with or scrutinized the suspect. The sympathy story described the suspect as a former foster kid who was a good student and lives with his ill grandmother who takes very expensive prescription medicine. The scrutinizing story described the suspect as a former criminal who did poorly in school and "didn't have much going for him."

#### Measures

The post-test questionnaire was made up of a total of 33 questions.

**Blame for the suspect.** Blame for the suspect was measured using items adapted from the Perception of Victim Blame Scale (Rayburn, Mendoza, & Davison, 2003). Using this semantic differential scale, respondents were asked to assess on a 6-point scale how responsible the suspect was for his actions. It consisted of 14 bipolar adjective pairs and included adjectives such as insane and sane, good natured and vicious, etc.

An additional three original Likert type questions were used to measure blame. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as "I believe the suspect should receive the maximum sentence for their crime."

**Sympathy for the suspect.** Sympathy for the suspect was measured using four six-points Likert scale items adapted from the Trait Sympathy Scale (Lee, 2009) that measured participants' feelings of sorrow and heartbreak for the suspect. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements such as

“While reading the article I did not have feelings of sorrow for the suspect” and “While reading the article I had feelings of concern for the suspect.”

**Negative feelings and fear of the entire racial group of the criminal.** Finally, in order to draw insight into what the participants thought about the racial group after reading their assigned article, they were asked to respond to eight six-point Likert scale items. Examples included statements like “I believe people of the suspect's race are peaceful” or “I believe that people of the suspect's race are dangerous.”

**Demographics.** Gender, age, level of education, and ethnicity were also assessed.

## Results

**H1a:** The first hypothesis predicted that the scrutinizing news frame will lead participants to have more blame for the suspect. Our independent variable (type of news frame) was categorical (scrutinizing/sympathizing) and our dependent variable (blame towards suspect) was continuous. Blame towards suspect was measured with both a six-point semantic differential scale (1= low blame, 6= high blame) and a six-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree, 6= strongly agree). To see if H1a is supported, we compared the mean of blame score from both conditions. Based on data in our sample, the blame mean of the scrutinizing condition was 4.71, and the blame mean of the sympathizing condition was 4.34. Thus, H1a supported since 4.71 is higher than 4.34.

**H1b:** The second part of H1 predicted that participants exposed to the scrutinizing news frame would have more negative feelings for the entire racial group of the suspect shown. Our independent variable (type of news frame) was categorical (sympathizing/scrutinizing) and our dependent variable (fear/negative attitudes towards racial group) was continuous. Fear and negative attitudes were measured with a six-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 6= strongly agree). To assess if H1b was supported, we compared the means of both frames among all participants. Based on the data in our sample, the negative attitudes mean for the scrutinizing frame was 3.52, and the negative attitudes mean for the sympathizing frame was 3.45. Thus, this hypothesis was supported, although very limited, since 3.52 is higher than 3.45.

**H2:** The second hypothesis predicted that when the race of the participant matches a crime suspect in a news story, regardless of the frame, the participant will be more sympathetic toward the criminal and his or her circumstances. Our independent variable (whether the race of the participant matches the suspect) was categorical (yes/ no), and our dependent variable (amount of sympathy) was continuous. Whether the race of the participant matched that of the suspect was measured by matching the race described in the crime story to the race that the participant self-reported. To see if the hypothesis is supported, we compared the mean sympathy measures of the participants that matched to those who did not. Based on data in our sample, the sympathy mean among matches was 3.60 and the sympathy mean among non-matches was 3.29. Thus, this hypothesis was supported since 3.60 is higher than 3.29.

## Discussion

### Implications

All of the hypotheses were supported. The participants with the scrutinizing frame had more feelings of blame for the suspect and negative feelings for the suspect's racial group. Secondly, those with matching identity of the suspect had more feelings of sympathy than those who did not match. Though it is important to mention that the difference in means in H1b was slight (.07). However, the fact that the scrutinizing frame overall produced more blame for the suspect and negative attitudes towards the suspect's race shows that the frame affected perceptions in both of these areas. This result is consistent with the research previously discussed on media priming and framing which states that messages framed in an accusatory manner will affect the viewer's perceptions of the story (Seate, Harwood, & Blecha, 2010).

Our predictions for H2 were also supported as participants who identified as the same race as the suspect in the article overall showed more sympathy towards the suspect than those participants whose race did not match. One possible explanation for this result could be related to research previously discussed on social identity theory. It is specifically related to the aspect of this theory which states that the stronger a person's identification with a particular group, the more motivated that person will be to protect both the status and interest of that group of which they are a part (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004). In the context of this theory, participants of the same race as the suspect would likely be more sympathetic towards the suspect in an effort to protect the group to which they both belong.

Another interesting, non-hypothesized, finding of this study was that overall the participants who read articles with black suspects felt more sympathy towards them regardless of the type of frame. On the other hand, participants shown white suspects reported higher levels of blame regardless of the frame they received. Also, the

overall positive feelings towards the race of the suspect were highest when the participant read an article with a black suspect. These results are inconsistent with previous research, which suggests white suspects normally receive more sympathy (Devine, 1989; Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Abraham, 1998, 2003). One possible explanation for this could be the changing racial climate of the United States with recent events such as the racial protests at the University of Missouri, which took place weeks before the study, and protests at Pepperdine University, where a large number of our participants attend school. Thus, it is possible that, regardless of the frame, participants felt more sympathy for Blacks because of the significant events taking place in the world outside of the study. Another possible explanation involves social desirability effects that were likely present specifically with the questions about race. Participants could have chosen to answer questions about race in a way that would seem more socially acceptable. It is likely that these results were a combination of both of these elements.

### Strengths and Weaknesses

One of the greatest strengths of our study is that we had both key elements of a true experiment (manipulation of a causal variable while controlling other variables and random assignment). We created four possible conditions, and each participant was randomly assigned to one of them. This means we had a high level of internal validity that gave us the ability to make causal claims based on our hypotheses. Also, because we used multiple measures for each variable that we were studying and because participants answered consistently across the measures of the same variable, our study had high levels of measurement validity and reliability. We also used reverse coded items to check and measure the reliability of our measures.

However, despite the high level of internal validity due to random assignment and manipulation of variables, one of the largest weaknesses of our study is an internal validity threat of history. Because of the recent events that have happened in the United States surrounding race, specifically with Blacks and Whites, it is likely that these outside events influenced our participants' answers and consequently influenced our results. In addition to this, another weakness is the likelihood of a social desirability effect, specifically with the questions about race. Because participants did not want to answer those questions in a way that would put them in a negative light, it is likely that this affected our results as well. Finally, experiments overall have low levels of external validity, meaning that we cannot generalize our results beyond the participants of our sample.

### Future Research

More research will need to be done assessing people's recent attitudes towards race since it has become such a prominent topic in our society over the last couple of years. Much of the research on this topic suggests that overall people have more negative feelings towards Blacks than Whites, but our research contradicts this. More research is needed to see if the results we witnessed are only a short-term result of the recent events in history or if people's opinions are entirely changing. Also, the majority of research regarding media framing and race has been done with Blacks and Whites, and it would be interesting to see similar studies conducted using people of different races and ethnicities.

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### Appendix

Considering the article you just read, for the following questions, please select the option that you think best describes the person in the article.

1. The person in the article is:  
violent 1 2 3 4 5 6 nonviolent
2. The person in the article is:  
gentle 1 2 3 4 5 6 forceful
3. The person in the article is:  
maniacal 1 2 3 4 5 6 sane
4. The person in the article is:  
good natured 1 2 3 4 5 6 vicious
5. The person in the article is:  
malicious 1 2 3 4 5 6 kind
6. The person in the article is:  
blameless 1 2 3 4 5 6 blameworthy
7. The person in the article is:  
fault 1 2 3 4 5 6 faultless
8. The person in the article is:  
harmful 1 2 3 4 5 6 harmless
9. The person in the article is:  
hurtful 1 2 3 4 5 6 innocuous
10. The person in the article is:  
responsible 1 2 3 4 5 6 irresponsible
11. The person in the article is:  
careful 1 2 3 4 5 6 reckless
12. The person in the article is:  
conscientious 1 2 3 4 5 6 careless
13. The person in the article is:  
reliable 1 2 3 4 5 6 unreliable
14. The person in the article is:  
dependable 1 2 3 4 5 6 undependable

Next, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements about the person and crime described in the article.

15. I can't help but feel sorry for the suspect of this crime  
1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree
16. It breaks my heart to hear about the suspect of this crime  
1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

17. While reading the article I did not have feelings of sorrow for the suspect

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

18. While reading the article I had feelings of concern for the suspect

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

19. I believe the suspect should receive the maximum sentence for their crime

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

20. I believe that this suspect is likely to repeat this behavior again

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

21. I believe white/black people are peaceful

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

Next, please respond the following items specifically about the person described and shown in the article you read.

22. I believe people of the suspect's race are peaceful

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree
- 5 Agree
- 6 Strongly agree

23. I believe people of the suspect's race are responsible

- 1 Strongly disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Somewhat disagree
- 4 Somewhat agree

5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

24. I believe people of the suspect's race are violent

1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

25. I believe people of the suspect's race are friendly

1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

26. I believe people of the suspect's race are dangerous

1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

27. I believe people of the suspect's race are reckless

1 Strongly disagree  
2 Disagree  
3 Somewhat disagree  
4 Somewhat agree  
5 Agree  
6 Strongly agree

28. If you were walking down the street and a person of this race approached you, how likely are you to feel threatened?

Very likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 not at all likely

29. If you were walking down the street and a person of this race approached you, how likely are you to feel anxious?

Very likely 1 2 3 4 5 6 not at all likely

Finally, please tell us yourself.

30. What is your gender?

Male  
Female

31. How old are you?

32. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

No schooling completed  
High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)  
Some college  
Associate's degree  
Bachelor's degree

Graduate degree or above  
Other (please specify)

33. Race/Ethnicity (Please select all that apply):

American Indian or Alaskan Native

Asian or Pacific Islander

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

White/Caucasian

Prefer not to answer

Other (please specify)

### Attachments

SAN FRANCISCO (AP)--Police arrested James Anderson in Vallejo Monday night on felony charges of armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon.

Anderson, 23, allegedly robbed an 83-year-old woman at gunpoint in the Castro District. When the woman refused to give Anderson her purse, he allegedly pistol whipped her and beat her. She remains in the hospital in critical condition.

Anderson, a black male, is a native to Vallejo. Officials divulged that Anderson has two prior convictions of theft. He also has a prior of aggravated assault.

"He wasn't the best student," Jacob Larson, who went to Vallejo High School with Anderson, said. "He dropped out in like the middle of junior year. He skipped class a lot and hung out with gang members and such.

That kid didn't have much going for him."

If convicted, Anderson faces a possible 9 years in prison.



*Photo Courtesy of Vallejo Police Department*

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Anderson, a white male, is a native to Vallejo. Officials divulged that Anderson has two prior convictions of theft. He also has a prior of aggravated assault.

"He wasn't the best student," Jacob Larson, who went to Vallejo High School with Anderson, said. "He dropped out in like the middle of junior year. He skipped class a lot and hung out with gang members and such.

That kid didn't have much going for him."

If convicted, Anderson faces a possible 9 years in prison.



*Photo Courtesy of Vallejo Police Department*

SAN FRANCISCO (AP)--Police arrested James Anderson in Vallejo Monday night on felony charges of armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon.

Anderson, 23, allegedly robbed an 83-year-old woman at gunpoint in the Castro District. When the woman refused to give Anderson her purse, he allegedly pistol whipped her and beat her. She remains in the hospital in critical condition.

Anderson, a black male, moved to Vallejo when he was fourteen to live with his now ill grandmother after spending twelve years in the foster system.



*Photo Courtesy of Vallejo Police Department*

“He was a good kid,” Jacob Larson, who went to Vallejo High School with Anderson, said. “He had two jobs. He always worked hard to support his granny. I think he got desperate. His grandma takes a lot of medication and I know it has to be expensive.”

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