



The Influence of Afrocentric Features and Gender in Criminal Sentencing

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Abstract

The effects of Afrocentricity (a combination of darker skin, coarse hair, wider nose, and fuller lips) and gender on sentence length, perceived dangerousness, and social distance were examined. Participants were randomly assigned to see 1 of 12 photographs embedded in the description of a theft and were asked to suggest a sentence length, complete social distance questions, and indicate the perceived dangerousness of the perpetrator. Three 3x2 Factorial ANOVAs found no significant effects.

Introduction

- Blair et al. (2002) argued that stereotypes are applied based on the individual features themselves and not the categories they are placed in. For example, aggression is more associated with darker skin than it is with Black individuals (Blair et al., 2005; Rushton & Tessler, 2012).
- Blair et al. (2002) suggested that Afrocentric features – a combination of darker skin, coarse hair, wider nose, and fuller lips – could lead to stereotyping individuals as a part of the group.
- Individuals with more Afrocentric features receive harsher sentences than individuals with less Afrocentric features (Blair et al., 2004; Burch, 2015; Eberhardt et al., 2006; King & Johnson, 2016; Peterson, 2017; Viglione et al., 2011).
- Black individuals are also perceived as being more dangerous (Blair et al., 2005; Correll et al., 2002; Correll et al., 2006; Dukes et al., 2017; Kleider et al., 2012; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000).
- Majority of studies above focused on men. There is a small, inconsistent literature on how Afrocentric features in women predict their sentencing.

Hypotheses:

- Black men would be given longer sentences and be perceived as more dangerous than Black women.
- Defendants with more Afrocentric features would receive longer sentences, be perceived as more dangerous, and would be given greater social distance than those with fewer Afrocentric features.
- No predictions for the interaction of Afrocentricity and gender.

Method

Participants

- 470 MTurk Employees, 104 students
- Ages ranged from 18 to 77 ($M = 34.96$, $SD = 12.43$)
- 244 women, 252 men, 3 others
- 79.5% White, 14.9% Black, 6.4% Asian, 4.4% Latino, 0.4% Native American, 0.4% Native Hawaiian, 0.4% Other.

Materials and Procedure

Participants followed a link to complete the study online. After granting their informed consent, each participant viewed a description of a theft from an upscale department store along with a randomly assigned photograph of the perpetrator. From the pilot study, 12 photographs (in a forward-facing position with neutral expressions) that were categorized as being low, moderate, or high in Afrocentricity were chosen for each gender (male, female). Participants suggested a sentence length in an open-ended format item.

Afterwards, participants responded to a modified Bogardus Social Distance Scale. It was modified by Mather et al. (2017) to make it more sensitive and precise. Like the Bogardus scale, the modified scale consists of seven statements appearing from least to greatest social distance. Each item is on a 5-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Responses are scored by using the rank order from the Bogardus scale multiplied by the participants' Likert score. Perceived dangerousness was rated on a scale from 1 (*not*) to 7 (*extremely*).

Results

Three 3x2 Factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted to examine the effects of Afrocentricity and gender on sentencing length, perceived dangerousness, and social distance.

Sentencing Length

Sentencing length of women ($M = 15.87$, $SD = 26.18$) did not differ from sentencing length of men ($M = 14.18$, $SD = 22.81$); $F(1, 493) = 0.68$, $p = .41$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$. Sentencing length in the low condition ($M = 14.20$, $SD = 24.62$), moderate condition ($M = 14.18$, $SD = 22.89$), and the high condition ($M = 16.80$, $SD = 26.08$) did not differ from each other; $F(2, 493) = 0.66$, $p = .52$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.003$. The interaction for Afrocentricity and gender was not significant; $F(2, 493) = 1.47$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.006$.

Perceived Dangerousness

Perceived dangerousness of women ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.55$) did not differ from perceived dangerousness of men ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.68$); $F(1, 493) = 0.002$, $p = .96$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$. Perceived dangerousness in the low condition ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.54$), moderate condition ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.71$), and the high condition ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.58$) did not differ from each other; $F(2, 493) = 2.81$, $p = .06$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.011$. The interaction for Afrocentricity and gender was not significant; $F(2, 493) = 2.48$, $p = .09$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$.

Social Distance

Social distance ratings for women ($M = 55.76$, $SD = 30.57$) did not differ from social distance ratings for men ($M = 59.09$, $SD = 30.93$); $F(1, 493) = 1.76$, $p = .19$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.004$. Social distance ratings in the low condition ($M = 54.34$, $SD = 30.24$), the moderate condition ($M = 61.68$, $SD = 31.38$), and the high condition ($M = 56.52$, $SD = 30.43$) did not differ from each other; $F(2, 493) = 2.74$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.011$. The interaction of Afrocentricity and gender was not significant; $F(2, 493) = 1.83$, $p = .16$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.007$.

Discussion

The three 3x2 Factorial ANOVAs indicated that there was not a significant effect of Afrocentricity (low, moderate, and high) and gender (men, and women) on sentence length, social distance or perceived dangerousness. These findings were inconsistent with previous literature and failed to provide support for my hypotheses. A limitation to this study was not getting much variation with the ratings of Afrocentricity between the moderate and high photographs. The average ratings for moderate Afrocentricity photographs was 5.48 and the average rating for high Afrocentricity photographs was only 6.11. Although there was a significant difference between the two groups, the means were similar, and the high Afrocentricity condition did not approach the upper end of the scale.

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