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Nicole F. Hofman
South Dakota State University

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Authority Presence and the Effect on Prejudice

Authors: Nicole L. Hofman
Faculty Sponsor: D. Spear
Department: Psychology

ABSTRACT

The current study analyzed the relationship between an authority figure's presence and the prevalence of prejudice when sentencing criminals. Eighteen undergraduate students (5 men and 13 women) aged 18 to 21 years, volunteered to participate in the study. Each participant completed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) and completed four fictitious criminal sentences. Significant support was not found for the current hypothesis, although more participants showed prejudice when the authority figure was absent compared to when the individual was present. Women showed prejudicial behavior more often than men when the authority figure was absent. Participants had a tendency to sentence longer for different races and for the crime involving homicide when compared to a rape crime.

INTRODUCTION

An Authority Figure's Presence and the Effect on Prejudice in Criminal Sentencing

According to Dovidio and Gaertner (1986) prejudice is an attitude that includes a "faulty generalization" towards a particular group or member of that group. Prejudice and stereotyping particularly affects African Americans living in the United States. Studies have shown that prejudice towards black Americans is still quite prevalent today among white Americans (Crosby, Bromley & Saxe, 1980). Stereotypes and prejudice have also been shown to be somewhat automatic. Because of this automatic reaction, it may be harder to control stereotyping in situations where attention is drawn to an individual's race (Blair, 2002). McConahay (1983) reported that white Americans react positively or negatively to African Americans based on the context of their behavior.

Prejudice is involved in criminal sentencing, and has been examined in a variety of studies involving both mock and actual trials. Sommers and Ellsworth (2001) report that white jurors are more likely to have a bias towards African American defendants when attention is not drawn to racial issues throughout the trial. Other studies have shown that a defendant's race can still greatly affect the process of criminal sentencing despite the attention prejudice in the courtroom has received over the years (Free, 2002). Jones and Kaplan (2003) have found that individuals feel that certain races commit certain crimes and this type of race-congruency behavior effects juror's decisions more often than just general racial stereotypes. The race of the defendant, victim and the juror has also been

found to have an effect on the outcome of a juror's verdict (Foley & Chamblin, 1982). Despite the attention racial matters are given throughout the trial process, it has been found that race does, in fact, still influence courtroom decisions (Lynch & Haney, 2000).

The presence of authority figures can also influence the prevalence of prejudice and stereotyping involved in decision-making. Petersen and Dietz (2000) have shown that when individuals receive direction and support from an authority figure, they will engage in more discriminative behavior towards others. Studies have also shown that an authority figure's influence and support of biased opinions can cause business leaders to develop prejudice and will discriminate towards employees based on race in the work place (Brief, et. al., 1995, Brief, et. al., 2000).

The current study analyzes a person's ability to sentence criminals and if prejudice or an authority figure's presence alters sentencing. Prejudice is measured using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald, Nosek & Banaji, 2003). Previous studies have used measurements such as the Modern Racism Scale. The IAT was specifically created to not measure blatant attitudes and is an improvement of older measures because it measures the automatic associations between concepts and attributes presented to individuals (Nosek, Greenwald & Banaji, 2005). Automatic associations involve a person's ability to associate concepts to certain categories. For example, a person is given the term "peace"; the responsibility of the individual completing the IAT is to classify the word as either "good" or "bad." The IAT is a measurement of the reaction times recorded when the participant is engaged in classifying the given concepts. The current study seeks to identify whether an authority figure's presence affects the existence of prejudice when sentencing criminals based on descriptions of individuals and crimes committed. It is expected that a prejudicial behavior toward criminals of different race will not be present when an authority figure is in the room but will be evident when the authority figure is absent.

METHOD

Participants

The participants included 18 undergraduate college students attending South Dakota State University. The participants included both men and women who were at least 18 years of age. Each of the participants volunteered and their involvement in the research was either part of a class assignment or they received extra credit. The participants were each given informed consent and after finishing their session, were thoroughly debriefed. This particular study followed the American Psychological Association's rules and regulations and was approved by the South Dakota State University's Institutional Review Board. Each researcher completed NIH research training online.

Materials

Participants were asked to complete a basic personality inventory created by the researchers. The questionnaire contains a variety of questions that have no established

validity. The main purpose of the questionnaire was to distract participants as to the true nature of the experiment.

Fictitious criminal scenarios were created by the researchers to assess participants' level of prejudice when assigning sentences. There were four criminal scenarios, Scenarios 1 and 4 involved white Americans and Scenarios 2 and 3 involve black Americans. The first two scenarios contained a crime that involved the homicide of another individual. The last two scenarios involved the crime of rape. Each scenario contained the same sentence terms, in the same order. Answer "A" was a sentence of 1-2 years, "B" was 2-5 years, answer "C" was a sentence of 5-10 years, "D" was 10-20 years and answer "E" was a sentence of 20 years or more.

Prejudice was measured using the Implicit Association Test (IAT). The test was designed to measure automatic associations between four distinct categories. The four categories used in this particular experiment were "good", "bad", "black" and "white". Each participant was required to place either an African American face, white American face, a word such as peace or one such as hate into either the "good", "bad", "black" or "white" category. Each participant's reaction time for each classification was recorded. The average of these measurements was then used to classify an individual's level of automatic associations into categories, such as "little or no", "slight", "moderate", or "strong" associations. The IAT has shown to be valid and reliable in measuring associations (Greenwald, Nosek & Sriram, 2006).

Design and Procedure

The research setting was on the campus of South Dakota State University with groups of six to nine participants involved in testing at each specific time. Each participant received both information regarding consent and informed consent forms to read and sign. The research assistant also read the form aloud. Information was given to each participant regarding the proposed nature of the study, which involved looking at personality characteristics and criminal sentencing. Each participant also received a copy of the information sheet for contact information. On the consent form a different title was used so participants would not be informed of the true nature of the study. Participants were then issued a personality questionnaire, created by the researchers, to act as a distraction as to what the experiment was designed to truly measure. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were asked to sentence two criminals based on descriptions of the crimes committed, with one criminal being African American and one a white American. While the participants sentenced the mock criminals, the authority figure was standing directly behind the group, watching each participant choose a specific sentence for each of the two scenarios. The group was then given two more criminals to sentence and at this time the researcher left the room, telling the participants that she was preparing the next portion of the session in the computer lab. When the sentencing of criminals was complete, prejudice was measured using the Implicit Association Test. The participants did not receive the results of the IAT.

After each participant completed the IAT, the researcher thoroughly debriefed the group of participants and stated that the research involved measuring the presence of prejudice in criminal sentencing. The researcher also stated that the study was examining

if an authority figure's presence had an affect on prejudice. If participation in the study was bothersome, the option of withdrawing his or her specific data was given to each participant. Each participant was also given the opportunity to visit the on campus-counseling center if there were any experiences of negative side effects that resulted from participating in the study.

RESULTS

The data was analyzed by comparing the presence of prejudice in regards to the presence of the authority figure using Chi Square. Results show that the presence of an authority figure did not significantly alter the presence of prejudice ($\chi^2(1, 18) = .103, p = .31$).

Table 1. Percent of Observed Prejudice with Authority Figure Absent

	Prejudice Present	Prejudice Absent
Men	5.5	22.2
Women	11.1	61.2

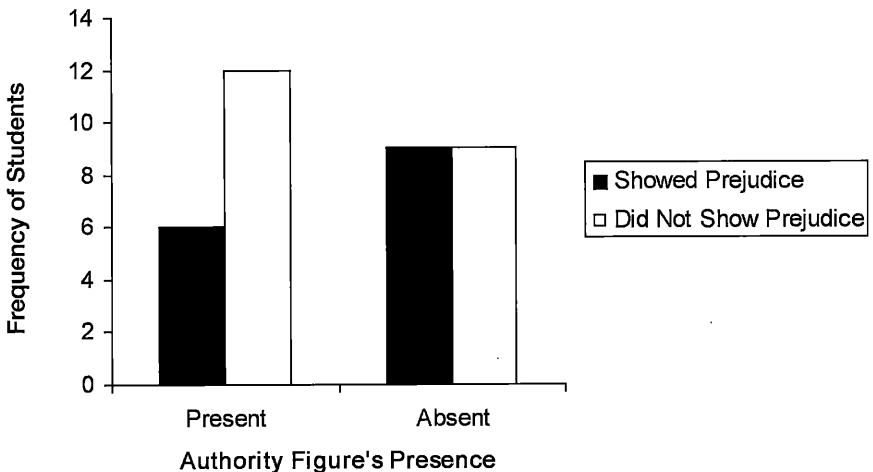


Figure 1. Frequency of participants who showed or did not show prejudice when the authority figure was absent or present.

Table 1 represents the percent of participants who showed prejudice when the authority figure was not present. Prejudice was measured by analyzing the sentence terms assigned for each particular scenario. Prejudice was said to be observed if the sentence that was the assigned when the authority figure was absent was longer than in comparison to when the figure was present. Participants generally did not show prejudice if the authority figure was not present. Women showed prejudice more frequently than men in the absence of an authority figure. Figure 1 represents the frequency of students who showed prejudice or did not show prejudice when the authority figure was present or absent. More participants did not show prejudice when the authority figure was present in comparison to when the authority figure was absent.

Frequency of sentences chosen by each participant can be found in Table 2. For scenarios 1 and 2, participants assigned longer sentences than for scenarios 3 and 4. Participants were assigned longer sentences for Scenario 2 in comparison to Scenario 1. When comparing frequencies of sentences for Scenarios 3 and 4, assigned sentences were longer in Scenarios 3 than in 4.

Table 2. Frequency of Sentences Given in Criminal Scenarios

		Race	White	Black	Black	White
		Crime	Murder	Murder	Rape	Rape
Sentence	1-2 years		1	0	1	2
	2-5years		3	1	2	7
	5-10years		4	3	3	2
	10-20 years		2	5	7	2
	20+ years		8	9	5	5

A two way between subjects ANOVA for race of criminal and sentence given is shown in Table 3. There was significance found in the main effect of the length of sentence given for each different crime ($F(1, 17) = 6.18, p = .02$) as well as in the race of the criminal ($F(1, 17) = 10.13, p = .005$). The interaction between the length of sentence given and the race of the criminal was not found to be significant.

Table 3. 2x2 ANOVA Table Comparing the Race of the Criminal and the Length of Assigned Sentence

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Crime	190.125	1	190.13	6.18	0.02
Error (Crime)	523.375	17	30.79		
Race	156.056	1	156.06	10.13	0.005
Error (Race)	261.944	17	15.41		
Crime * Race	0.5	1	0.50	0.05	0.83
Error (Crime * Race)	167.75	17	9.868		
Total	1299.75	17			

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study are not strong support for the hypothesis that an authority figure's presence will alter the presence of prejudice. There was no significant difference found between prejudice and an authority figure's presence. However, it is important to note that more participants did show prejudice when the authority figure was absent. It is also important to notice that participants were more likely to assign longer sentences for the crime of homicide than the crime involving rape. Statistical analysis also showed a strong relationship contingent on the race of the individual who committed the fictitious crime and the length of the sentence that was assigned.

There are a number of confounding variables that could have influenced the results of the current study. The sample size was very small, with only five men, which could alter the significance of the data. Another error that could have altered the data is the lack of a standardized measurement used to evaluate prejudice. Although some studies have found the IAT to be a reliable form of measurement of automatic associations, it is a relatively new form of measurement and must go through more extensive testing in order to be considered fully reliable and valid. There has also been an extensive amount of controversy in regards to the IAT and its attempt to measure behaviors. Although the IAT has been found to be accurate in measuring associations, the IAT has not been found to predict an individual's future behavior when race may be an issue (Bower, 2006). Also, the IAT was developed to measure associations, which can be considered by some, to not be measuring prejudice (Blanton, Jaccard, Gonzales & Christie, 2006). Because of the lack of standardized measurement in regards to prejudice, it is a difficult behavior to define and measure. This particular behavior is difficult to measure because depending on the degree of prejudice, individuals are able to control whether they judge using stereotypes (Devine, 1989). Other studies have shown that individuals are sensitized toward racial stereotypes and can control to a degree their usage of stereotypes in making judgments (Blair, Judd & Fallman, 2004)

College students' view of the law, courtroom decisions, and lawmakers is less respectful when compared to other generations (Borup & Elliott, 1970). This could alter the participant's decision when sentencing a criminal, most likely making them more lenient because they may feel that the law and punishments are too harsh. This aspect would affect the results because it would alter the person's ability to sentence accurately because personal opinions would hinder the ability to make the most logical and detached decision.

The social desirability of each individual could have also affected the results of the current study. Studies have shown that certain behaviors and actions that are considered more desirable are often over reported due to emphasis placed on social desirability (Motl, McAuley & DiStefano, 2005). This aspect may have affected the current study because participants could have sentenced criminals not based on their true feelings but on whether or not the sentence they chose would be desirable to the researchers.

Future research could focus on increasing the sample size used for the study. Perhaps a larger sample would provide better statistical evidence for the current hypothesis. In addition, a different form of measuring prejudice could also be used to

provide a more accurate analysis of the behavior. Research should also focus on using criminal scenarios that are similar in the particular subject matter and which represent a number of different races. This would be useful to analyze more accurately the attitude of prejudice as well as see which race it is directed to the most frequently.

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