

Racial and Behavioral Cues in Black and White Children's Perceptions of Ambiguously Aggressive Acts

H. Andrew Sagar and Janet Ward Schofield
University of Pittsburgh

To explore the way in which the interpretation of ambiguous social behavior can be influenced by racial stereotypes and cultural differences, 40 black and 40 white 6th-grade males were shown a variety of ambiguously aggressive behaviors performed by black and white stimulus figures. As predicted, both black and white preadolescents rated these behaviors as more mean and threatening when the perpetrator was black than when he was white. In contrast, ratings of personal characteristics were in general determined by individual behavior rather than by group stereotypes, although blacks, whether they were the perpetrator or the recipient of the behaviors, were rated as stronger than their white counterparts. Cultural differences between subject groups were apparent in the greater tendency of the white children to read threat into ambiguously aggressive behaviors involving no physical contact and to assume that the perpetrators of such behaviors were stronger than the recipients.

A recent study by Duncan (1976) suggests that perceptions of an ambiguously aggressive act can be influenced to a remarkable degree by the race of the actor. White male college students coded behaviors observed in what they thought was a live dyadic interaction on a television monitor. The ambiguous shove that concluded the increasingly heated argument on the monitor was coded as violent behavior by 35 of the 48 persons who saw a black actor shove another

person. Of the 48 students who saw a presumably identical act by a white actor, only 6 used the violent behavior code. Duncan argued that because of stereotypes associating blacks with violence, the violent behavior category is cognitively more accessible to subjects viewing a black perpetrator than to those viewing a white one.

Duncan's (1976) study raises at least three important questions, the first of which is methodological: Were the stimulus tapes completely comparable so that the subjects' differential responses can be attributed solely to racial cues rather than to subtle differences in the behavior of the black and white actors? Second, assuming the manipulation to be valid, is the phenomenon Duncan demonstrated unique to whites, or might black subjects have responded in a similar fashion? Finally, is the violent black stereotype applied selectively to blacks who engage in potentially confirmatory behavior, or does it bias perceptions even of those blacks whose behavior is clearly nonconfirmatory?

Since the methodological question poses a potentially serious threat to Duncan's (1976)

The research on which this article is based was funded by the second author's contract 400-76-0011 with the National Institute of Education (NIE). Other expenses relating to its preparation were covered by the authors' joint grant NIE-G-78-0126 also from NIE and the second author's grant 1R01 MH31 602-01 from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). However, all opinions expressed herein are solely those of the authors, and no endorsement by NIE or NIMH is implied or intended.

The authors wish to extend their thanks to the students and staff of Wexler School for their generous cooperation with the research.

Requests for reprints should be sent to H. Andrew Sagar, who is now at the Department of Psychology, Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania 17022.

findings, we will discuss it first. Duncan sought to make the taped interactions used in his research conceptually, rather than literally, identical to each other. The loosely constructed script permitted black and white confederates to "adopt their respective patois" (p. 592). Although this strategy probably made the tapes realistic, it leaves open the question of whether the subjects' differential responses to blacks and whites were based on visual race cues, as Duncan contended, or on variations in the verbal and behavioral styles of the actors.

To assess the comparability of the 12 tapes that were employed in his research (two black and two white confederates in all possible role pairings), Duncan had 40 high school students rate the personal characteristics of the confederates in each tape. No between-condition differences were found. Unfortunately, however, there appears to be no firm basis for assuming that these raters were any more objective and accurate than Duncan's college student subjects. For example, seeing blacks and whites playing the same roles could have motivated the high school raters to try to preserve their unprejudiced self-concepts by overlooking subtle differences and responding similarly to the different tapes (cf. Dutton, 1976).

The point of the foregoing discussion is not that the tapes necessarily lacked practical comparability, but rather that such cross-racial comparability is both crucial to the experiment and difficult to demonstrate with any certainty. The experimental realism achieved in Duncan's scenario may have been high; nevertheless, confidence in the experiment's conclusions would be greatly increased if similar results could be obtained with stimuli whose precise comparability could be more clearly documented.

A second question, raised by the fact that all of Duncan's subjects were white, is whether the biased perception of blacks' behavior revealed by that study is unique to whites. It is easy to assume that the tendency to code the black actor's behavior as violent represents a motivated response to a negatively valued outgroup. Cooper and Fazio (1979), for example, have discussed biased evaluations of outgroup members' behavior in

terms of a vicarious personalism resulting from a perceived conflict of interest between groups. They argued that observers often deem it safer to infer the worst about outgroup members than to risk a premature lowering of their cognitive guard. Negative characterizations of outgroup members may also reflect a desire for the relative enhancement of the ingroup. For example, Howard and Rothbart (1980) found that subjects who believed that their group assignment implied something fundamental about their psychological characteristics associated more negative and fewer positive statements with the experimentally created outgroup than with their own group. Either of these motives might be expected to contribute to symmetrical responses by black and white subjects, with each group inferring greater violence on the part of the other.

In contrast, a considerable body of research in desegregated schools indicates that both black and white students tend to link blacks with concepts of threat, aggression, and violence, although the link appears generally stronger in the minds of whites (Clement, Eisenhart, & Harding, 1979; Patchen, Hoffmann, & Davidson, 1976; Scherer & Slawski, 1979; Schofield, in press). These shared perceptions may well derive in part from observation of actual behavioral differences between members of the two groups, which are commonly characterized by unequal socioeconomic and academic status within the same school. In addition, Hamilton and Gifford (1976) have demonstrated that a cognitive bias, such as illusory correlation (Chapman, 1967), can produce discrepant impressions of different groups apart from any motivational or objective considerations. Also, Tversky and Kahneman (1974) have demonstrated several other cognitive biases that, by logical extension, might be expected to affect blacks' and whites' perceptions of social groups in similar ways. In the absence of overriding ingroup-enhancement motives, then, blacks and whites exposed to similar behavioral evidence should process it via the same cognitive shortcuts, with shared stereotypic beliefs as the expected result.

We hypothesized that, like Duncan's white college population, the preadolescent white

children participating in the present study would consider ambiguously aggressive behaviors to be more mean and threatening (and less playful and friendly) when these behaviors were attributed to a black rather than to a white peer. Furthermore, the literature on black and white children's racial beliefs, as well as our own extensive observations in the school from which our subjects were selected, led us to hypothesize, somewhat more tentatively, that a similar pattern of responses would be evidenced by black children.

One final question derives from Duncan's use of the concept of category accessibility to explain his results. Stereotypes, often by definition, are generally assumed to affect impressions of all members of the stereotyped group (Brigham, 1971). In contrast, Bruner's (1957) discussion of category accessibility seems to imply a threshold effect: A category, though accessible, will be elicited only by relevant perceptual events. This raises the possibility that the violent-black stereotype may bias trait attributions to persons who engage in stereotype-relevant behavior without influencing responses to those who do not. That is, a black person performing an ambiguously aggressive action may be more readily categorized as violent and therefore be considered a more violent person than an identically behaving white; in contrast, a clearly nonaggressing black may not be considered any more violent than his or her white counterpart because nothing in his or her behavior brings the violent-black stereotype to mind. Such a response pattern, if found, would help to explain how persons who are convinced that they judge each black person as an individual might nevertheless overestimate the physical aggressiveness of blacks as a group.

It is of course possible that the association of blacks with threat and violence influences the perception of all black stimulus persons. If such be the case, even those black persons whose observed behavior is clearly nonaggressive should be considered to have a somewhat less nonviolent disposition than identically behaving white persons. The Duncan study, in focusing solely on the shove and its perpetrator, did not address this issue. We assumed that ratings of individuals' personal

characteristics relating to threat and violence, such as the extent to which they are mean, rude, unfriendly, and so forth, would be influenced primarily by whether they were the initiator or the target of the ambiguously aggressive act. A more interesting prediction, flowing from the work on category accessibility, was that black initiators would be judged even more negatively than white initiators because of the ready availability of relevant black stereotypes, whereas the passive black and the passive white targets of these acts would be judged similar to each other.

Although we expected both black and white subjects' ratings of behaviors to be influenced by racial cues, we also anticipated that the two subject groups would respond differently to the behaviors per se, independently of racial cues. The work by Triandis and his colleagues on subjective culture (Triandis, 1976; Triandis, Vassiliou, Vassiliou, Tanaka, & Shanmugam, 1972) provides a clear basis for anticipating different interpretations of specific behaviors by black and white subjects. This work has shown that persons from different cultural groups (including, occasionally, black and white Americans) often make different causal attributions for the same behavior, with interpersonal misunderstanding as the result. For example, if physically assertive actions are both more common and more functional in the black ghetto than in the surrounding middle-class areas, as Maruyama (cited in Triandis, 1976) has concluded, then ghetto residents might have higher thresholds for perceiving such actions (or those who perform them) negatively, independently of the actor's race. Thus, we predicted that the predominantly lower socioeconomic status (SES) black students in our sample would consider the stimulus behaviors as intrinsically less mean and threatening (and more playful and friendly) than would the predominantly middle-to-upper SES white students, regardless of the actor's race.

In summary, the research reported here constitutes a conceptual replication of the Duncan study in its attempt to explore, with a different population and more precisely equivalent stimuli, the influence of racial cues

on the interpretation of ambiguously aggressive acts. It goes beyond that study, not only in varying the behavior of both white and black stimulus persons but also in comparing the responses of white and black observers.

Method

The Research Site

The study was conducted in an urban north-eastern middle school with approximately a 2:1 black-white student ratio. The school had been interracial throughout the 3 years of its existence but drew its students from neighborhoods characterized by a high degree of residential segregation. As is typical of desegregated public schools in the United States, black students as a group were characterized by lower average socioeconomic status and academic achievement than their white counterparts. Nearly 3 years of extensive observation in the school had revealed virtually no overt racial conflict, and examples of positive interracial interaction were numerous. (See Schofield & Sagar, 1979, for a fuller account of the school and its social climate.)

This generally positive picture was balanced by interview data in which both black and white students reported that white students were more likely to be intimidated by their black peers than vice versa (Schofield, in press; Patchen & Davidson, 1974, and Scherer & Slawski, 1979, found a similar pattern among high school students). Respondents in these interviews rarely reported specific incidences of serious intimidation, however; and the proper interpretation of those incidents that were described was often unclear. It was precisely the ambiguity of such events that gave racial cues an opportunity to significantly influence their interpretation.

Subjects

From the school's male sixth-grade population, 40 white and 40 black students were selected randomly, within race categories. Of those originally selected, 1 white and 2 blacks classified by the school administration as learning disabled were replaced because of possible difficulties in following the experimental instructions. Parental permission for the students' participation was sought with a success rate of 88% for white students and 78% for black students. Most failures to obtain permission reflected an inability to reach the parents rather than direct refusals. When permission was not obtained, alternates were selected randomly from the same population.

Stimulus Materials

Each subject was provided with oral descriptions and artist's renditions of four different dyadic inter-

Table 1
Assignment of Pictorial Stimuli to Stimulus Sets

Stimulus set	Interaction type			
	Bumps	Asks for cake	Pokes	Takes pencil
1	WW	WB	BB	BW
2	BW	BB	WB	WW
3	BB	BW	WW	WB
4	WB	WW	BW	BB

Note. B means black; W means white. Within each cell, the first letter stands for race of the actor; the second stands for race of the target.

actions determined by prior observation and/or student interviews to be fairly common in the school and subject to different interpretations as to their benign or threatening nature. The depicted interactions were bumping in the hallway, requesting food from another student, poking a student in the classroom, and using another's pencil without asking. Verbal descriptions of the four interactions were identical across subjects. Two of these descriptions follow in full:

Donald had just sat down in the cafeteria with his lunch when Anthony came up to him and said, "Hey, can I have your cake?" Donald didn't know Anthony very well, but he let him have his cake, even though it was a kind he usually ate himself.

Mark was sitting at his desk, working on his social studies assignment, when David started poking him in the back with the eraser end of his pencil. Mark just kept on working. David kept poking him for a while, and then he finally stopped.

The descriptions were read directly to each child, rather than recorded, to maintain attention and to make the session more natural. The experimenters were trained to read the accounts in comparable tones.

Four different sets of pictorial stimuli were used, with each experimenter's subjects assigned randomly, in equal numbers, to each set. Each set depicted the same four interaction types, with each interaction type involving a different one of the four possible black/white racial permutations of actors and targets. Across stimulus sets, each interaction type was shown with all four racial permutations. Table 1 illustrates the makeup of the stimulus sets. The order of presentation of interaction types within each set was randomized independently for each student.

The design of the experiment, then, was built on a 4 × 4 Latin square. This design permitted each subject to respond to all four race permutations

without the reactive artificiality of varying race within the same interaction type for the same subject. At the same time, the Latin square avoided confounding race permutations with interaction types. The portrayal of various combinations of black and white boys in different situations was natural in this particular school setting, given the interracial student body and the increasing use of curriculum materials that routinely portray both blacks and whites. None of the children indicated that they were aware of the experiment's concern with the race factor in response to a postexperimental question on this matter.

To ensure complete comparability of detail in the four pictorial versions of each interaction, pictures were photocopied from original line drawings depicting two white males. Racial identities were changed as necessary, prior to duplication, by re-drawing the hair and noses and, in a few cases, slightly softening prominent chins. Because of their importance as expressive features, eyes and mouths were left unchanged, as were all other details. The resulting pictures were colored with pencils to increase visual interest and to make actors' and targets' racial identities unambiguous. Faces and arms were colored either with a brown or "flesh" pencil.

All pictured students were male and were drawn to appear about the same age as the subjects themselves. Familiar furniture and background details helped support the experimenter's assertion that the depicted interactions had been observed in the subjects' own school.

Procedure

Each student met individually in a private conference room in the school building with an adult male experimenter of the student's own race. (Two black and two white experimenters participated in the study.) The experimenter referred to the ongoing observational study of the school, explaining that the researchers occasionally saw incidents that they had difficulty interpreting and suggesting that the subject might be able to help. The experimenter then instructed the subject in the use of the 7-point semantic differential-type scale and summarized the procedure to follow.

The set of pictures that the subject was to see and the order in which he was to see them were randomly assigned ahead of time. The pictures were displayed on a small stand, which prevented the experimenter from seeing them and thus kept him blind to the race of the interactants. The race manipulation was therefore purely visual, as would have been the case if the subjects had directly observed an actual interaction.

Following the pictorial and oral presentation of each dyadic interaction, the subject rated how well each of several adjectives (playful, friendly, mean, and threatening) described the actor's behavior. They then rated the probable personal characteristics of both actor and target on identical sets of

semantic differential scales that covered dimensions believed relevant to the depicted behaviors (e.g., thoughtless-considerate, strong-weak, threatening-harmless).

Results

Analyses of variance (ANOVAS) followed the Latin square fractional factorial design illustrated in Kirk (1968, p. 417), modified to permit examination of experimenter effects treated as an additional between-subjects factor nested within race of subject. None of the 30 possible main experimenter effects and only 4 of the 90 possible interactions yielded *F*s significant at or beyond the .05 probability level, indicating that experimenter style was probably not an important factor in subjects' responses to the verbal and pictorial stimuli. A complete examination of experimenter effects was precluded by the fact that the experimenter's race was necessarily confounded with race of subject.

The 4×4 nature of the Latin square required treating the race permutations as four levels of a single factor. Significant *F* values on this factor provided justification for testing actor race, target race, and interaction effects with simple contrasts, using the error variance estimate generated by the ANOVA. The significant main effect of race permutations on the summed mean/threatening scales, $F(3, 192) = 3.02, p < .05$, was found to reflect, as expected, a tendency for subjects to rate the behaviors of black actors more mean/threatening than identical behaviors by white actors, $t(144) = 2.90, p < .01$. Race permutations did not affect the playful/friendly ratings, $F(3, 192) = 1.10, ns$. No statistically significant main effects or interactions were found for target race, indicating that target race did not measurably influence judgments of the actors' behaviors.

The lack of any statistical interaction between race of subject and race permutations, $F(3, 192) < 1, ns$, suggests, as had been tentatively predicted, that the ratings reflect a general bias among this male student population, rather than a uniquely white response. The means in Table 2 reveal the similar pattern of response by black and by white subjects. The black actors' behaviors were rated more mean/threatening than those of the

Table 2
Mean Ratings of Both White and Black Actors' Behaviors by Both White and Black Subjects

Subject group ^a	Actor race ^b	Rating scale	
		Mean/threatening	Playful/friendly
White	White	8.28	6.43
	Black	8.99	6.24
Black	White	7.38	7.19
	Black	8.40	6.74

Note. Means are based on sums of paired 7-point scales indicating how well the given adjective described the behaviors, from 1 (not at all) to 7 (exactly).

^a $n = 40$ for each group.

^b Each subject rated two white and two black actors and two white and two black targets. Means are not broken down by target race, since no statistically significant main effects or interactions were found for this variable.

white actors by black subjects, $t(72) = 2.40$, $p < .01$, as well as by white subjects, $t(72) = 1.70$, $p < .05$.

Both black and white subjects' mean ratings of the various behaviors, collapsed across race permutations, are shown in Table 3. As predicted in the subjective culture hypothesis, both requesting food and taking a pencil were rated more mean/threatening, $t(72) = 2.92$ and 3.12 , $p < .01$, and less playful/friendly, $t(72) = 2.19$ and 2.03 , $p < .05$, by white than by black subjects. Racial differences in rating the bumping and poking be-

haviors were not significant. Thus, the expected main effect for race of subject was not significant on either the mean/threatening or playful/friendly scales summed across behavior types, $F(1, 64) = 3.67$ and 3.22 . Instead, race of subject interacted with behaviors on both scales, $F_s(3, 192) = 5.30$, $p < .01$, and 2.96 , $p < .05$, respectively, due to the fact that our predictions of a race main effect were borne out for only two of the four behaviors. Interestingly, the behaviors whose ratings conformed to our expectations were the two that involved no direct physical contact.

Despite the evidence of a tendency to judge an ambiguous behavior more negatively when it was performed by a black as compared to a white, the subjects' ratings of the pictured blacks' and whites' personalities were heavily influenced by the depicted behavior and the stimulus person's role (actor or target), as we expected. Black and white subjects agreed that the actors were ruder, meaner, more thoughtless, playful, threatening, unfriendly, and less likable than targets, regardless of race permutations. Two-tailed t values for the actor versus target comparisons ranged from ± 11.36 to ± 34.49 with 216 df , all significant at $p < .001$. There were only two exceptions to this pattern of general agreement between black and white children about the characteristics of the actors and targets: White students assumed that actors were stronger than targets, $t(216) = 9.01$, $p < .001$, and that targets were more fearful than actors, $t(216) = -7.62$, p

Table 3
Black Subjects' and White Subjects' Mean Ratings of Four Ambiguous Behaviors Collapsed Across Dyad Race

Rating scale	Subject race ^a	Behavior			
		Bumps	Requests food	Pokes	Takes pencil
Mean/threatening	White	9.98	7.85	8.13	8.58
	Black	9.60	6.10	9.18	6.71
Playful/friendly	White	4.73	7.01	8.15	5.45
	Black	5.66	8.28	7.31	6.63

Note. Means are based on sums of paired 7-point scales indicating how well the given adjective described the behavior, from 1 (not at all) to 7 (exactly).

^a $n = 40$ for each racial group.

Table 4
Mean Trait Ratings of White and Black Actors and Targets

Role	Race	Rating scale	
		Strong/ weak ^a	Threatening/ harmless ^b
Actor	White	4.48	4.35
	Black	4.91	4.60
Target	White	3.90	2.31
	Black	4.53	2.69

Note. Means were based on 7-point scales ranging from 1 to 7. Each cell represents two ratings by each of 80 subjects.

^a Higher values indicate greater strength.

^b Higher values indicate greater threat.

< .001, whereas black students did not, $t(216) = -1.88$ and $-.27$, respectively.

We had predicted that actors' personality ratings on dimensions related to threat and violence would also be influenced by their race, whereas no such race effect was predicted for ratings of targets. The results suggest that race generally had relatively little impact on the personality ratings of either actors or targets. Only two of the scales showed a race effect (see Table 4). Black actors were rated stronger than white actors, $t(144) = 3.48$, $p < .001$, and black targets were rated stronger than white targets, $t(144) = 4.37$, $p < .001$. Black actors were only marginally more threatening than white actors, $t(144) = 1.59$, *ns*, but white targets were considered even less threatening (i.e., more harmless) than the equally passive black targets, $t(144) = 3.10$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

Duncan's experiment and the present study, with their complementary methodological strengths, together provide clear evidence that even relatively innocuous acts by black males are likely to be considered more threatening than the same behaviors by white males. This tendency to perceive threat in blacks' behaviors appears to be all too generalizable to a number of situations and

populations in this country. It occurred in Duncan's study in which white college students saw one confederate give another a light shove in the context of a rather heated discussion. It appeared again in this study as sixth-grade students judged four different interaction types that involved no direct suggestion of anger and, in two cases, no physical contact whatsoever. Most notably, in this study behavior ratings by black students reflected the same antiblack bias as those by white students.

The similarly biased responses of the black and the white students suggest that such biases should not be regarded as ego-motivated reactions to an outgroup. Some might argue that the black subjects had simply internalized the antiblack attitudes of the dominant white culture, as suggested by the early doll-choice studies (Kluger, 1976); but, without rejecting that argument completely, we suspect that the convergence between the two groups in this biracial school reflects a complex interaction between actual behavioral differences and apparently universal cognitive processes. For example, the tendency to overestimate the difference between the distributions of an observable characteristic in two different populations (Allport, 1954; Eiser & Stroebe, 1972; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) would be expected to apply to black and to white observers alike.

The fact that our subjects attributed no more negative traits to black than to white actors, although unexpected, may simply indicate that the technique of rating behaviors provides the more sensitive measure of subtle stereotyping tendencies. It may be that as overt antiblack prejudice has become socially more undesirable, Americans have learned to describe black persons with caution but have not yet recognized reactions to specific behaviors as potential indicators of prejudice. The symbolic racism scale (McConahay & Hough, 1976), which often detects antiblack feeling among persons who do not appear prejudiced on more traditional scales, may be effective in part because many of its items give respondents the opportunity to disapprove of the alleged behavior, rather than the personal characteristics, of black Americans as a group.

Despite the apparent generalizability of the tendency to interpret actions by a black person as more violent or threatening than the same actions performed by a white person, it should be emphasized that the phenomenon has thus far been demonstrated only in the case of males observing interactions between males. A similar study employing female subjects and stimuli might well produce a similar, or even stronger, pattern of results because of the disproportionate emphasis placed on the value of feminine daintiness and vulnerability in white, as opposed to black, culture (Clement, Eisenhart, Harding, & Livesay, Note 1). Research designed to explore this issue would be worthwhile.

The expected tendency of the white subjects in this study to read more threat into the ambiguous behaviors than black subjects was confirmed only in the case of the behaviors that involved no physical contact but did involve one person acting to obtain a material good from another. Staples's (1976) assertion that black culture tends to consider property a collective asset may be relevant here: The black subjects appear to have considered these two behaviors to be at least marginally legitimate. The white subjects, in contrast, may have assumed that the actors would not have initiated such seemingly inappropriate acts, had they not been prepared to back them up with physical force. This reasoning is supported by the fact that the white subjects assumed actors were stronger and less fearful than their targets, whereas the black subjects did not.

It should be apparent that none of the tendencies noted here can be linked with race per se. The black students participating in the study were, on the average, clearly of lower socioeconomic status than the whites, as is the case in most desegregated schools and indeed in the United States as a whole. If such differences did not exist and the background of the black and the white students in the school had been equivalent, the indicated cultural differences might well not have appeared and the stereotype that gave rise to the biased behavior ratings might not have been so much in evidence. But in the existing social order, the stereotype is all too

real. To activate it, the person engaging in an ambiguous behavior need only be black.

Reference Note

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Received August 27, 1979 ■