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Aylin Kaya

College of William and Mary

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Perceptions of Alleged Criminals as a Function of Target Race, Media Presentation, and Prejudice Level

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Psychology from The College of William and Mary

by

Aylin Kaya

Accepted for Honors (Honors)

Cheryl Diokter, Director

Catherine Forestell

Salih Can Aciksoz

Williamsburg, VA
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Perceptions of Alleged Criminals as a Function of Target Race,
Media Presentation, and Prejudice Level

Aylin Kaya
The College of William and Mary
Abstract

News reports of criminals often provide sympathetic descriptions of White criminals, while demonizing Black criminals; this discrepancy has been found to result in viewers holding racialized beliefs about crime. The purpose of the current study was to examine the potential implications of media portrayals by examining whether the perceptions of an alleged criminal would vary based on the target’s race and whether he was described in a sympathetic or neutral manner. Participants read either sympathetic or neutral descriptions of a violent crime where the alleged criminal was either White or Black, and then answered questions about their perceptions of that criminal. Results indicated that while low-prejudiced participants’ perceptions were not affected by the manipulations, high-prejudiced participants viewed the Black criminal more positively when he was described in a sympathetic manner than when described neutrally; the manipulations did not affect high-prejudiced participants’ perceptions of the White criminal. The results also suggest that the relationship between individual levels of prejudice and ratings of the criminal become non-significant for Black and White targets when a sympathetic depiction of the event is given. The implications for prejudice theories and practical applications are discussed.
Perceptions of Alleged Criminals as a Function of Target Race, Media Presentation, and Prejudice Level

Recent tragedies such as the Sandy Hook school shooting in December 2012, and the Aurora theater shooting in July 2012 captured a great deal of attention from the public, prompting questions regarding how the shooters were described by the media. Both shooters were White males, and news outlets discussed at length their personal lives, their accomplishments and hobbies, and their psychological well-being. In many reports, the young men were described as mentally ill, and one report went so far as to describe the Sandy Hook shooter, Adam Lanza, as a “quiet, friendless boy” in a clear attempt to portray him sympathetically (McVeigh, 2012). In stark contrast, the convicted murderers of the 2002 Beltway sniper attacks, John Allen Muhammad and his accomplice John Lee Malvo, two Black men, were portrayed as violent criminals alleged by the news to have links to terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda (Morello, Davenport, & Harris, 2002). Malvo, who was a minor at the time of the shootings, attempted to plead insanity, claiming that he was indoctrinated and sexually abused by Muhammad, though his claims garnered him no sympathy from the media (Sager & Stump, 2012). These cases bring up questions of whether media depictions of criminals vary based on their race, and, if so, whether these differences have consequences for how alleged criminals are subsequently perceived.

Psychologists have noted the disparity in how people of color are portrayed in a variety of media outlets, compared to Whites. Television portrayals of Blacks often elicit anti-Black sentiment by emphasizing violent crimes committed by Black individuals (Entman, 1990); Black criminals are shown more frequently in news coverage of violent crime, and these criminals are
depicted as more menacing than White criminals in the same context (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 2009). One potential reason for this difference in the portrayal of Whites and Blacks may be the different learned stereotypes associated with these two racial groups. In particular, the most prevalent Black stereotype is that Blacks are more likely to have violent and criminal dispositions (Quillian & Pager, 2001), with violent traits such as hostility, aggression, and criminality automatically associated with Blacks (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Payne, 2001). Indeed, Americans consistently rate Blacks as more violent than any other racial group; in one study, 52% of White participants rated Blacks a 6 or higher on a 1-10 scale of aggressiveness; the “aggression and violence” stereotype has been shown to be the most frequently endorsed racial stereotype for Blacks among White Americans (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993).

Several studies have examined the inculcation of racial stereotypes, and have found that these stereotypes exist in memory and are the result of repeated activation of learned associations (Devine, 1989). The amount of media exposure has a significant impact on stereotype-forming, such that heavy consumers of media, particularly of television programs, more readily and more frequently form stereotyped perceptions of other people (McGhee & Frueh, 1980). Even children without the cognitive ability to evaluate stereotypes and their validity still learn and activate stereotypic associations (e.g., Aboud, 1988; Allport, 1954). These learned stereotypic associations are activated automatically and can affect perceptions of (Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997) and behaviors toward (Brewer & Kramer, 1985) Blacks. For example, several studies have found that even after watching a White criminal get arrested for committing a violent crime, participants were later likely to misidentify the criminal as Black (e.g., Oliver & Fonash, 2002). Another study found that when participants were asked to reconstruct an
individual’s race-related facial features following exposure to a portrayal of a crime on the news, participants selected African-centered facial features when the story concerned a violent crime (Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2006). It is not surprising, then, that the overexposure to violent stereotypes of Blacks results in the perceptions of Blacks as being more violent in general (e.g., Dixon, 2008).

Researchers have also investigated how the learned stereotypes about different racial groups can influence their perception of media portrayals. Because of the association between Black and the stereotype of violence and crime (e.g., Devine, 1989), viewers find television portrayals of crime most memorable when the perpetrator of the crime is a Black man, and even more so when he looks more stereotypically Black (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Learned stereotypes also affect the attributions that are made about targets’ behaviors. A study by Mastro et al. (2009) noted that crimes committed by Black men are attributed by participants to his character, whereas crimes committed by Whites are attributed to the situational circumstances. Indeed, other researchers have also found that White crime is usually perceived as a result of circumstances as opposed to the individual’s characteristics (e.g., Sanders, 2005). Research has also suggested that White criminals are more likely to be viewed as individuals than non-White criminals, which humanizes them and makes them seem more sympathetic; this individuation also serves to perpetuate the notion that crimes committed by a White individual should not be attributed to their entire race (e.g., Jackson & Heckman, 2002). In contrast, criminals who are ethnic minorities are lumped into stereotyped groups and are seen as an “Otherized” figure (Wilkins, 2008).

Stereotype-consistent media portrayals have been shown to affect later person perception
processes involving other targets. For example, White participants who watched racialized, stereotype-consistent depictions of crime viewed Black suspects more fearfully and hatefully than they did White suspects presented in the same manner (Peffley et al., 2009), and the effects that media portrayals have on person perception seem to have a greater influence when a target criminal is Black. That is, when participants were exposed to media violence without the assailants’ race being identified, they were more likely to attribute violence to a Black male compared to a White male target (Johnson, Adams, et al., 1997). In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Johnson et al. (2009) examined the media’s influence on people’s allocation of empathy, and found that exposure to negative stereotypes about Blacks minimized participants’ support for public policies that would assist Black victims of the hurricane. However, when participants were exposed to similarly negative media depictions of Whites, their responses regarding public policies had not changed. Similarly, another study found that exposing White participants to comedic, stereotypical portrayals of Blacks led to the participants attributing more guilt to Black targets upon hearing about a violent crime, though the participants did not attribute as much guilt to White targets after exposure to stereotypical portrayals of Whites (Ford, 1997). This demonstrates that negative media portrayals of racial minorities can change the perception of target individuals and groups.

Most of the research that has examined the link between media representation of Blacks and the resulting negative perceptions has focused on how biased media coverage leads to negative perceptions of Blacks. Much of this research has been correlational in nature or has focused on perceptions of Blacks as a group or the strength of stereotypic associations that result from biased media coverage. Less research, however, has examined how perceptions of
individual criminals of color are affected by careful manipulations of media coverage.

Because media portrayals tend to be biased against people of color (e.g., Mastro & Greenburg, 2000) and can affect later person perception (e.g., Johnson et al., 2009), it is important to examine how media portrayals of a crime can affect the person perception of people of color. There has already been research on how negative, stereotype-activating portrayals of Blacks can alter person perception, but there has been less research on whether a positive, sympathetic portrayal can result in a more positive perception of a target. The current study examined whether judgments of Black and White criminals were affected by differences in the media portrayal of their crime by manipulating the level of sympathetic and individuating information used in a media portrayal of a crime. It was expected that exposing participants to individuating information would prompt them to make a situational attribution for the target’s violent behavior by encouraging them to engage sympathetically with the target, which could reduce the tendency that has been shown in previous work to attribute crimes committed by Blacks to their character (Mastro et al., 2009). The crime investigated was a violent crime, which was chosen because violence is a stereotype associated with Blacks but not Whites (e.g., Devine, 1989).

In the current study, participants read a news article describing a violent crime that was allegedly committed by either a White or Black target. The article conveyed either a sympathetic description of the target and provided individuating information about him in the form of comments from friends or family (sympathetic condition) or a neutral, objective description of the crime (control condition). It was hypothesized that Black criminals would be perceived negatively in the control condition, given the work done by Mastro et al. (2009) which
demonstrated that crimes committed by Black targets are attributed to their character, and the evidence that these is a strong learned association between Blacks and criminality in our society (e.g., Devine, 1989; Welch, 2007). When sympathetic, individuating information was used to describe the criminal, however, it was hypothesized that Black criminals would be viewed more positively, compared to the control condition. This hypothesis was based on findings that indicate that prompting participants to engage sympathetically with an outgroup target increases individuation of that target (Zhang, 2009) and in turn, individuation counters effects of stereotyping and prejudice, and thus reduces negative judgments of racial minorities (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997). White targets were expected to be viewed equally positively, regardless of condition.

It was also expected that explicit racial prejudice would moderate the hypothesized effects. High-prejudiced participants are more susceptible to forming negative impressions of targets following stereotype priming than low-prejudiced participants (Lepore & Brown, 1997), and the processes involved in person perception and stereotyping have been shown to differ based on levels of prejudice (Rudman & Lee, 2002). Because low-prejudiced participants activate stereotypes to a lesser degree than high-prejudiced participants (Devine, 1989) and are more consistent in their judgment of outgroup members regardless of individuating information (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997), it was expected that they would be unaffected by the experimental manipulations and judge the targets in all conditions relatively similarly, regardless of race or the description of the criminal.

For high-prejudiced participants, however, it was expected that a higher degree of stereotype activation would lead to more negative judgments of the Black target in the control
condition, given the violent nature of the crime; but that when provided with individuating information about the target, high-prejudiced participants would rate the Black target more positively than in the control condition. This hypothesis is based on work demonstrating that high-prejudiced White participants respond more favorably toward a Black target when presented with individuating information that challenges negative stereotypes about Black people (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997). Thus, we anticipated that engaging with a sympathetic narrative about the Black target would result in a more positive perception of that target. For White targets, no differences were expected based on condition, given the lack of negative, crime-related stereotypes about Whites (e.g., Devine, 1989).

Method

Study Design

This study employed a 2 (Target Race: Black, White) X 2 (Condition: Sympathetic, Control) between-subjects design in which participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Participants

One hundred sixty nine participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.86, SD = 1.97$) who self-identified as White were recruited from the campus of the College of William and Mary. Students were able to sign up through an online system and gain partial participation credit for their Introduction to Psychology class. All procedures were approved by the college’s Protection of Human Subjects Committee, and each participant signed a written informed consent form prior to beginning the study.

Materials
**Stimuli**

*Target Images.* Target images consisted of two full-color photographs of Black and White males. Pictures were obtained from Jennifer Eberhardt and were pilot-tested to be similar in attractiveness and age (Eberhardt, Davies, Purdie-Vaughns, & Johnson, 2006). Individuals in the pictures displayed neutral facial expressions and direct eye gaze; only the head and part of the neck were shown.

*News Articles.* Four news articles were created, each of which featured a protagonist engaging in a certain act, and each article included a photograph of that protagonist. The first two news articles were filler articles used to maintain the cover story and to shield participants from the true purpose of the study. One article described a former supermodel at Milan fashion week, and the other described a mayor on a political visit. The third and final news report described a violent act in which the perpetrator of the crime was described in either a neutral manner, or was given a sympathetic, individuating description (the first independent variable). As demonstrated in Appendix A, the details of the crime itself were identical in both the sympathetic and neutral articles, but the sympathetic article included individuating information designed to induce sympathy toward the criminal by describing his personality and his personal life, as well as questioning how he could have been drawn to the act, hence subtly attributing the violence to the situation rather than the individual. Both of the articles included a photograph of the criminal, who was said in the article to be White or Black (the second independent variable).

**Measures**

*Social Media Scale.* This scale consists of series of questions that were multiple-choice, open-ended, or rated a Likert-type scale, that gauged how much participants interact with news
media, as well as which news sources they use. These questions were primarily used to maintain the cover story and were not analyzed as they were not of theoretical interest.

**Memory Questionnaire.** A brief memory questionnaire consisting of five questions per article was created to maintain the cover story. The questions were either multiple-choice or open-ended and prompted the participants to recall basic details about each article. This measure also served as a manipulation check to ensure that in regards to the third article, participants were able to correctly recall the race of the target criminal.

**Person Perception.** To assess how positively or negatively the target was perceived, participants answered a questionnaire as shown in Appendix B. Participants indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). Statements such as “I find this person likable” and “I feel that this person is smart” were included. Because of acceptable inter-question reliability ($\alpha = .77$), nine of the relevant items were averaged together to create a general “positivity score” for the target. Participants also indicated their general sympathy for the target criminal by answering 12 questions ($\alpha = .86$) on a similar scale to the one described above. Examples of sympathy questions are ratings of how deserving of sympathy they thought the criminal was, and how curious they were about his side of the story.

**General Empathy.** In order to determine how empathetic participants were in general, participants were asked to complete the Interpersonal Reactivity Scale, as shown in Appendix C (Davis, 1980). This scale consists of 18 items ($\alpha = .84$) answered on a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). The questions are designed to gauge how much the participant engages in perspective-taking, how much he or she feels empathetic
concern for others, and how much he or she feels personal distress when hearing about
somebody else in a troubling situation.

*Prejudice*. To measure the participants’ explicit prejudice toward Blacks, the Attitudes
Towards Blacks scale (Brigham, 1993), which consists of 20 items ($\alpha = .88$), was used, as shown
in Appendix D. The questions were answered on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (“strongly
disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”) and participants indicated how they felt about topics including
racial integration, interracial marriage, and affirmative action.

**Procedure**

Participants completed the study in groups of 2-4 students. Upon arrival, participants
were seated at individual computer stations with privacy screens. Each participant was given an
informed consent form as shown in Appendix E, and was assigned a participant number. The
participants were told that the study was examining the effects of media consumption on
memory, and filled out the questionnaire on their use of social media outlets. They then read the
news articles. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four study conditions.

Participants were told to retain as much information about the article as they could, and
were asked the questions regarding their perception of and sympathy toward the protagonist after
each article. The participants then completed the brief memory questionnaire, and were
subsequently asked to identify what they thought the purpose of the study was. Participants then
completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Scale (Davis, 1980), followed by the Attitudes Towards
Blacks Scale (Brigham, 1993). Finally, each participant was asked to complete a short
demographic questionnaire, and was then debriefed about the true nature of the study.

**Results**
Participants who failed to correctly recall the race of the criminal from the target article did not have their data included in the final analysis ($n = 2$). Additionally, participants who failed to answer two or more questionnaire items on any one measure were not included in the data analysis ($n = 2$). Thus, the data analyzed were obtained from 165 White participants (103 female, 62 male; $M_{age} = 18.81, SD = 1.76$).

To conduct the manipulation check to ensure that the Sympathetic condition did indeed produce more sympathy for the criminal than the Control condition, an independent samples t-test was conducted with Condition as the independent variable and ratings of sympathy for the target as the dependent variable; these ratings were obtained from the aggregate of sympathy questions derived from the Person Perception questionnaire. Results indicated that participants in the Sympathetic condition ($M = 3.88, SD = 0.80$) felt more sympathy for the target than those in the Control condition ($M = 3.31, SD = 0.94$); $t(162) = -4.19, p < .001$.

To examine the main test of the hypothesis that perceptions of the target would vary as a function of race and sympathy, a 2 (Target Race: Black, White) X 2 (Condition: Sympathetic, Control) between-subjects analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The dependent variable was the composite variable of positive perceptions. Interpersonal Reactivity was used as a covariate to control for general sympathy. Results indicated a main effect for sympathy, such that participants who were in the Sympathetic condition ($M = 3.54, SE = .08$) perceived the criminal more positively than participants in the Control condition ($M = 3.12, SE = .08$), $F(1, 163) = 11.73, p = .001, \eta^2 = .07$. There was also a main effect of Race, such that Black targets ($M = 3.45, SE = .08$) were perceived more positively than White targets ($M = 3.21, SE = .09$), $F(1, 163) = 4.08, p = .045, \eta^2 = .03$. The interaction between Target Race and Condition was not
Because the hypothesized Target Race x Condition interaction was not significant, the role of prejudice was next examined as a potential moderator. Participants were designated as either High or Low prejudice following a median split (median value = 2.31) of their responses to the Attitudes Towards Blacks scale. A 2 (Target Race: Black, White) x 2 (Condition: Sympathetic, Control) x 2 (Prejudice: High, Low) between-subjects ANCOVA with Interpersonal Reactivity as a covariate and the composite variable of positive perceptions as the dependent variable was conducted. There was once again a main effect of sympathy, such that participants placed in the Sympathetic condition ($M = 3.55$, $SE = .09$) perceived the criminal more positively than participants in the Control condition ($M = 3.16$, $SE = .09$), $F(1.163) = 10.29$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .04$. This main effect was qualified by a significant Race x Sympathy x Prejudice interaction, $F(1, 163) = 7.16$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .044$.

When this analysis was broken down, for low-prejudiced participants, as shown in Figure 1A, there was only a main effect of Condition demonstrating that targets were perceived more positively in the Sympathetic condition ($M = 3.60$, $SE = .12$) compared to the Control condition ($M = 3.10$, $SE = .10$), $F(1, 163) = 10.64$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .12$. For high-prejudiced individuals, however there was a significant Race x Sympathy interaction, $F(1, 80) = 6.41$, $p = .013$, $\eta^2 = .079$. As demonstrated in Figure 1B, simple main effects analyses showed that high-prejudiced participants who read a sympathetic description of the Black target perceived him more positively ($M = 3.77$, $SE = .16$) than when he was in the control condition ($M = 3.02$, $SE = .18$), $F(1, 46) = 10.17$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .19$. The White target was perceived equally positively in the
Sympathy ($M = 3.23, SE = .19$) and Control conditions ($M = 3.41, SE = .21$), $F(1, 34) = .35, p = .561, \eta^2 = .01$.

To further examine the interaction between prejudice, target race, and sympathy condition, and to capitalize on the use of prejudice as a continuous variable, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The first variable was a 4-level condition (Black Control, Black Sympathetic, White Control, White Sympathetic), and the second variable was the continuous ATB variable. An interaction term was created by multiplying the condition by the mean-centered variable of ATB. The main effects were entered in the first step of the regression, while the interaction term was entered in the second step. The dependent variable used in the analysis was the aggregate variable of positive perceptions of the target. Results indicated a marginal Sympathy x ATB interaction, ($\beta = .156$), $t(162) = 1.88, p = .061$. As shown in Figure 2, the correlations between positive perceptions of the target and ATB in the Black Sympathetic (simple slope = .002) and the White Sympathetic (simple slope = −0.09) conditions were non-significant. For the Control conditions, however, a positive perception of the target criminal was significantly correlated with ATB for both the Black targets (simple slope = −0.25), $t(155) = −1.66, p = .049$ and the White targets (simple slope = 0.42), $t(155) = 2.35, p = .010$, but in opposite directions. These results suggest that in the control condition, higher prejudice was associated with more negative evaluations of Black targets and more positive evaluations of White targets, but that prejudice was unrelated to evaluations of the targets when they were portrayed in a sympathetic, individuating manner.

**Discussion**

The current study examined whether perceptions of an alleged criminal would vary
depending on his race and the manner in which he was described in a media portrayal. The primary focus of this study was to examine whether sympathetic, individuating information describing an alleged criminal would affect perceptions of that target criminal, and how this would interact with the target’s race and the perceiver’s prejudice level. The results indicated that although perceptions of the targets did not differ overall as a function of sympathy and race, participants’ prejudice levels played an important moderating role in this relationship. For participants high in prejudice, the Black target was perceived more positively in the sympathetic condition than in the control condition, while the White target was perceived similarly in both conditions. For low-prejudiced participants, all targets were perceived equally.

These findings suggest that low-prejudiced participants’ perceptions of alleged Black and White criminals were unaffected by the intersection of race and how sympathetic the description of the criminal was. As prior research has noted, low-prejudiced participants tend to be more consistent with their perceptions of outgroup members, and also display less stereotype activation (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997), which indicates that low-prejudiced people do not change their perceptions of outgroup members as readily as high-prejudiced people do. Furthermore, low-prejudiced participants endorse fewer explicit stereotypes and report less negative judgments of Blacks compared to high-prejudiced participants (Devine, 1989), and do not readily endorse cultural stereotypes (Kawakami, Dion, & Dovidio, 2000). It is likely, then, that the stereotypic association between Blacks and criminality did not affect low-prejudiced participants’ judgments about the Black target, regardless of the type of information provided about the target.

High-prejudiced participants, on the other hand, were affected by the study’s
manipulations. Specifically, results indicated that high-prejudiced participants rated White targets equally positively regardless of the condition, most likely due to Whites being judged favorably because there are few negative stereotypes associated with Whites (Devine, 1989). High-prejudiced participants, however, rated the Black target more positively in the sympathetic condition than in the control condition. Studies have indicated that high-prejudiced participants engage in more stereotype activation of outgroup members, particularly in the absence of individuating or stereotype-challenging information (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997) such as what the participants encountered in the control condition in the present study. High-prejudiced participants also readily endorse negative learned stereotypes about Blacks, specifically that Blacks are more prone to violence and criminality, and these stereotypes are activated automatically (Kawakami, Dion, & Dovidio, 1998). This stereotype activation likely led the high-prejudiced participants to view the Black alleged criminal more negatively in the control condition than in the sympathetic condition.

In addition, the results from the regression analysis demonstrated that in the control condition, prejudice level was negatively related to positive perceptions of Blacks and positively related to positive perceptions of Whites. This suggests that, when lacking individuating information about target criminals, individuals with more prejudice show a greater bias in favor of White alleged criminals, and a bias against Black alleged criminals. These results imply that in the absence of individuating information, high-prejudiced participants’ judgments are based on stereotype activation. Given evidence that the media portrays Blacks different than Whites (e.g. Mastro & Greenburg, 2000), these findings can have important implications for media portrayals of alleged criminals, particularly when the crime is stereotype-consistent, such as the case with
Blacks and violent crimes.

In the sympathetic condition, however, there was no relationship between prejudice level and perceptions of the Black or White targets. This demonstrates that inducing sympathy for a suspect can reduce the bias and negative judgments that high-prejudiced participants have against Blacks; describing the criminal in a sympathetic, individuating manner led high-prejudiced participants to judge Black targets just as low-prejudiced participants did. This is consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated that media can indeed reduce effects of stereotyping and implicit prejudice, so long as that media portrayal is positive, and even more so if the form of media prompts the viewer to engage in perspective-taking (Zhang, 2009). The findings of this study are also consistent with Peffley, Hurwitz, and Sniderman’s (1997) study, which demonstrated that exposing high-prejudiced participants to individuating, stereotype-challenging information prompted the participants to have a more favorable perception of a Black target.

The results of the current study have important implications for the moderating role that individuation can have for prejudice, stereotyping, and person perception. As other researchers have noted, although prejudice and stereotyped views direct the way certain people act toward outgroup members (Brewer & Kramer, 1985), prejudice is malleable and can be countered by exposing viewers to positive portrayals of outgroup members (e.g., Blair, 2002; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). Furthermore, prejudice is most malleable when people are prompted to undertake emotional reconditioning, through activities such as perspective-taking and empathizing with outgroup members (Kawakami et al., 2000), as participants did in the current study. Our results support this previous work by suggesting that providing individuating
information can reduce negative perceptions of stereotyped individuals. Furthermore, given that Black alleged criminals are often shown as menacing in media portrayals in comparison to White alleged criminals (Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 2009), it was significant that our findings showed that including sympathetic, individuating information can result in a more positive perception of an alleged Black criminal, even among high-prejudiced participants.

This holds important implications for media portrayals of alleged criminals, in that exposure to sympathetic and individuating information may potentially lead to less biased behavior towards minority group members who are alleged criminals, as well as fewer behaviors motivated by prejudice and stereotype-directed fear. The current findings also suggest that more individuating portrayals of alleged criminals in the media may lead to less negative judgments and less biased behaviors toward outgroup members, which can affect race-related disparities in the sentencing of criminals (Hudson, 1989). That is, if alleged criminals are depicted in a sympathetic and individuating manner regardless of their race, the current results suggest that the effects of pre-existing prejudice and stereotyping may be mitigated. This may hold important implications for attributing guilt and punishment to criminals, particularly in the form of court sentencing.

There are a number of limitations to this study that must be addressed when thinking of its implications. First, our sample was limited in that all of the participants were White college students. This limitation was imposed on the study given the available sample; that is, although it was expected that participant race might play a role in perceptions of target criminals, it was not possible to recruit a diverse enough sample at the current institution to yield large enough groups. Future research should investigate potential perceiver race differences; as studies have
noted, even individuals of color have a highly racialized view of crime, despite being aware that they are stereotyping under the influence of the media (Madriz, 1997). The participant pool also had an unequal female to male ratio, in that females were overrepresented. Another limitation of the current study is that the measure of prejudice used as well as the perception questions were self-report in nature. Although participants were reminded that the study was anonymous, we cannot discount the limitations of using self-report measures to assess explicit prejudice and perceptions of Black and White targets. Furthermore, the prejudice measure looked at explicit prejudice and there were no measures in place to study the participants’ implicit prejudice, which may have also affected their responses. A current ongoing study in our lab is using a more subtle measure of perceptions of the target, such that participants will compose their own brief article about a Black or White target criminal, which will later be coded for sympathetic and negative/position perceptions in order to study how much sympathy is attributed to each criminal based on his race and the participants’ perception of the crime. With this study, we hope to continue to understand the importance of prejudice and how it impacts the person perception of and attribution of sympathy toward an alleged criminal based on race. Beyond this, more research needs to be done to better understand the processes by which high-prejudiced participants come to view outgroup members more positively, and whether these participants’ perceptions are driven more by individuating information, or by inducing sympathy for an outgroup member.

The media continues to cater to viewers’ learned racial stereotypes, leading to greater stereotyping and attribution of crime and violence to ethnic minorities. As psychologists have noted, exposure to the overrepresentation of Blacks as criminals on the news is correlated with the perception of Blacks as being violent in general (Dixon, 2008), and the media’s perpetrating
negative stereotypes about Black people can reduce empathy for them even in the face of victimization (e.g., Johnson et al., 2009). The current study on race and media has demonstrated the impact that sympathetic, individuating information presented in a news article can have on reducing the effects of prejudice. This can inform future media portrayals of ethnic minorities and alleged criminals, who perhaps can be humanized the way that White alleged criminals currently are in the media. After all, even though the media can reinforce stereotypes, it also has the power to challenge them.
References


Appendix A

News Articles

Control Condition:

“Murder Allegation Shakes Up a Community”: VA (AP) — A robbery-related shooting has left a small Virginia community feeling deeply disturbed. The shooter, an office manager, Michael Jones, is a 26 year old (Caucasian or African-American) male. Family and friends describe him as being “a very quiet, intelligent, and reserved young man.” One neighbor says that she used to babysit him and claims that this is “unimaginable.” The man in question entered his victim’s home at two o’clock in the morning in an attempted robbery; upon being discovered, he shot the man in the chest. The man was taken to the hospital, where he died of his injuries, and the robber was arrested after neighbors reported that they heard a gun being fired. His victim was taken to the hospital where he died of his injuries. The shooter’s trial has been scheduled for November 13.

Sympathetic Condition:

“Murder Allegation Shakes Up a Community”: A robbery-related shooting has left a small Virginia community feeling deeply disturbed. The accused shooter, an office manager, Michael Jones, is a 26 year old (Caucasian or African-American) man. Family and friends describe him as being “a very quiet, intelligent, and reserved young man.” One neighbor says that she used to babysit him and claims that this is “unimaginable.” The man in question allegedly entered his victim’s home at two o’clock in the morning in an attempted robbery; upon being discovered, he shot the man in the chest. The robber was arrested after neighbors reported
that they heard a gun being fired. The man was taken to the hospital, where he died of his injuries. The allegation that this well-liked young man robbed and shot a middle-aged man has rocked the community and left many people asking, “How?” How could this young man have been drawn into an act like this? “He’s going to have to live with this for the rest of his life,” said the neighbor. She later said that she thinks that Michael was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. “He could never have done this otherwise,” she reiterated. The alleged shooter’s trial has been scheduled for November 13, with Jones’ lawyer telling reporters: “Michael is a peaceable young man. He had no intention to kill anybody that day.”
### Appendix B

Person Perception Items

1. I would want to be friends with this person.
2. I feel that this person was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.
3. I feel that this person should be given a break.
4. I feel that this person is outgoing.
5. I feel that this person is worthy of my respect.
6. I feel that this person is physically attractive.
7. I feel sorry for this person.
8. I can understand why this person did what they did.
9. I feel compassionate toward this person.
10. I feel that this person is friendly.
11. I would like to know more about this person.
*12. I feel that this person is immoral.*
13. I find it easy to see from this person’s perspective.
14. I think that this person is interesting.
15. While I was reading this article, I put myself in the person’s shoes.
16. I believe there are two sides of every story, including this one.
17. I feel that this person is smart.
18. I would be interested in reading this story from that person’s perspective.
19. I would be interested in questioning the person to find out more about what they did.

*Starred items were reverse coded.*
Appendix C

Interpersonal Reactivity Items

1. I daydream and fantasize, with some regularity, about things that might happen to me.

2. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.

*3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view.

*4. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.

5. I really get involved with the feelings of the characters in a novel.

6. In emergency situations, I feel apprehensive and ill-at-ease.

7. I am usually objective when I watch a movie or play, and I don't often get completely caught up in it.

8. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.

9. When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.

10. I sometimes feel helpless when I am in the middle of a very emotional situation.

11. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.

*12. Becoming extremely involved in a good book or movie is somewhat rare for me.

*13. When I see someone get hurt, I tend to remain calm.

*14. Other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.

*15. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments.

16. After seeing a play or movie, I have felt as though I were one of the characters.

17. Being in a tense emotional situation scares me.
18. When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don't feel very much pity for them.

19. I am usually pretty effective in dealing with emergencies.

20. I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.

21. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.

22. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.

23. When I watch a good movie, I can very easily put myself in the place of a leading character.

24. I tend to lose control during emergencies.

25. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.

26. When I am reading an interesting story or novel, I imagine how I would feel if the events in the story were happening to me.

27. When I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces.

28. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.

*Starred items were reverse coded.
Appendix D

Attitudes Toward Blacks (ATB) Items

1. If a Black person were put in charge of me, I would not mind taking advice and direction from him or her.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree strongly agree

2. If I had a chance to introduce Black visitors to my friends and neighbors, I would be pleased to do so.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree strongly agree

3. I would rather not have blacks live in the same apartment building I live in.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree strongly agree

4. I would probably feel somewhat self-conscious dancing with a Black person in a public place.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree strongly agree

5. I would not mind it at all if a Black family with about the same income and education as me moved in next door.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   strongly disagree strongly agree

6. I think that Black people look more similar to each other than White people do.
7. Interracial marriage should be discouraged to avoid the “who-am-I?” confusion which the children feel.

8. I get very upset when I hear a White person make a prejudicial remark about Black people.

9. I favor open housing laws that allow more racial integration of neighborhoods.

10. It would not bother me if my new roommate was Black.

11. It is likely that Blacks will bring violence to neighborhoods when they move in.

12. I enjoy a funny racial joke, even if some people might find it offensive.
13. The federal government should take decisive steps to override the injustices Blacks suffer at the hands of local authorities.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

14. Black and White people are inherently equal.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

15. Black people are demanding too much too fast in their push for equal rights.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

16. Whites should support Blacks in their struggle against discrimination and segregation.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

17. Generally, Blacks are not as smart as Whites.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

18. I worry that in the next few years I may be denied my application for a job or a promotion because of preferential treatment given to minority group members.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

strongly disagree strongly agree

19. Racial integration (of schools, businesses, residences, etc.) has benefited both Whites and
20. Some Blacks are so touchy about race that it is difficult to get along with them.

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Items 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, & 19 were reverse coded.
Appendix E

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between media exposure and memory. You will be asked to read a series of brief news articles. We ask that you try to remember each one as accurately as possible. Following the reading task, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire about the news reports. If you feel uncomfortable reading the news article, or in answering any of the questions, you may terminate your participation in the study at any time.

Your privacy is important to us and we will make every effort to protect your privacy. An arbitrary code number has been assigned to you for this study. The link between this code number and information that could be used to personally identify you will be kept in a password-protected database in a locked location. The results of this experiment will not be linked to any specific individual; we are only interested in group averages. No identifying information will ever be made public.

Please read the paragraph below and sign at the bottom.

The general nature of this study entitled “Media and Memory” conducted by Aylin Kaya (aekaya@email.wm.edu) has been explained to me. I understand that I will be reading a series of news reports and answering questions related to the news reports. My participation in this study should take about half an hour. I understand that my responses will be confidential and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I know that I do not have to participate
in this study and that if I do choose to participate, I may stop at any time without any penalty. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and I also understand that any credit for participation will not be affected by my responses or by my exercising any of my rights. I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Lee Kirkpatrick, 1-855-800-7187 or consent@wm.edu. I understand that I may contact Dr. Cheryl Dickter about this experiment to ask any questions or to obtain the results of this study after it is completed at 757-221-3722 or cldickter@wm.edu. I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

______________________________
Date

______________________________  ____________________________
Signature                  Print Name
Figure 1A. Positive Perceptions of the Target as a Function of Race and Condition for Low-Prejudiced Participants
Figure 1B. Perception as a Function of Race and Condition for High-Prejudiced Participants
Figure 2. Positive Perceptions as Function of Explicit Prejudice and Condition

Note. Attitudes Towards Blacks is mean-centered.