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# WHEN PERCEPTION AND REALITY COLLIDE: IMPLICIT BIAS AND RACE

Two recent studies published by the American Psychological Association (APA) about perceptions and race led to these headlines: “We Think Black Men are Bigger than White Men (Even When they're Not)” and “Black Boys Are Perceived as Older and Less Innocent than Their White Peers.” These studies, one in 2014 and the other in 2017, found that people’s perceptions of African-American boys and men were inaccurate and different compared to their white counterparts. These perceptions are a reflection of stereotypes and assumptions that lead to implicit bias and can ultimately lead to discrimination that has consequences, sometimes dire.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about implicit bias, explore two recent APA studies about perceptions of African-American boys and men and develop a piece of personal writing where they reflect on implicit bias.

**[Note to Teacher:** This lesson focuses on how African-American boys and men are perceived compared to their white male counterparts. It reveals stereotypes about Black men and boys and racial implicit bias. It is important to consider that you may have African-American students in your classroom and reflect on how they may feel during the lesson. Be prepared and sensitive to those students, taking into account the extent to which they are a minority or majority of your classroom and plan accordingly. Some African-American students may feel relieved and comfortable discussing these issues and others may feel nervous, uncomfortable or angry to be talking about a topic so close to home. You may want to talk with those students in advance and determine how they can discuss this topic while feeling comfortable and safe.]

See these additional ADL resources: Lesson Plans “[Exploring Solutions to Address Racial Disparity Concerns](#)” and “[The Movies, the Academy Awards and Implicit Bias](#),” [Teaching about Racism, Violence, Inequity and the Criminal Justice System](#) and [Love Has No Labels Campaign](#).

**Grade Level:** grades 9–12

**Time:** 45 minutes

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will understand the difference between bias and implicit bias.
- Students will reflect on two recent studies about perceptions of African-American boys and men and draw connections to implicit bias.
- Students will reflect on an experience with implicit bias by writing a reflective essay.

## Compelling Question: How do perceptions and stereotypes lead to implicit bias?

### Material:

- “Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism” POV episode of *Who, Me? Biased?* (2016, 3 mins., POV/*The New York Times*, [www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818663/peanut-butter-jelly-and-racism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818663/peanut-butter-jelly-and-racism.html))
- “[Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent than Whites, Research Finds](#)” APA Press Release, one copy for half the students
- “[People See Black Men as Larger, More Threatening Than Same-Sized White Men](#)” APA Press Release, one copy for half the students

### Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s “[Glossary of Education Terms](#).”)

- altercation
- custody
- innocence
- psychological
- assumption
- dehumanize
- misperception
- restraints
- comport
- disproportionality
- muscularity
- threatening
- culpability
- hypothetical
- overestimate
- unconscious

## INFORMATION SHARING

1. Briefly share information about two studies published by the American Psychological Association (APA) about race, perception and stereotypes. Explain that one study shows how Black boys are perceived compared to white boys in terms of childhood innocence and age. The other study illustrates how Black men are seen compared to white men in terms of height, weight and strength. Ask students: *Can anyone guess what the researchers found out?* Keep this discussion brief.
2. Ask students: *What is bias?* Explain/ elicit a definition of **bias** as an inclination or preference either for or against an individual or group that interferes with impartial judgment.
3. Show the video, “[Peanut Butter, Jelly and Racism](#).” Discuss briefly by asking: *How would you describe implicit bias? What do you take away from the video?*
4. Ask students: *What is implicit bias?* Project the following definition on the board/smart board and read aloud:

**Implicit bias** is the unconscious attitudes, stereotypes and unintentional actions (positive or negative) towards members of a group merely because of their membership in that group. These associations develop over the course of a lifetime beginning at a very early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages. When people are acting out of their implicit bias, they are not even aware that their actions are biased. In fact, those biases may be in direct conflict with a person’s explicit beliefs and values.

5. Ask students to provide an example or two of implicit bias or share the following examples:

**Example 1:** There was a study where thousands of resumes were sent to employers with job openings. Before sending them out, the researchers randomly assigned stereotypically African American names (“Jamal”) on some and stereotypically white names (“Brendan”) on others. The same resume was 50%

more likely to get a callback for an interview if it had a “white sounding” name. (Source: Marianne Bertrand, and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination,” *American Economic Review* 94(2004): 991-1013.)

**Example 2:** Researchers asked students to rate teachers of an online course (the students never saw the teachers). To some of the students, a male teacher claimed to be female and vice versa. When students took a class from someone they believed to be male, they rated the teacher more highly. The very same teacher, when believed to be female, was rated significantly lower. (Source: Lillian MacNell and Matt Shipman, “Online Students Give Instructors Higher Marks If They Think Instructors Are Men,” NC State University, <https://news.ncsu.edu/2014/12/macnell-gender-2014/> (accessed April 4, 2017).)

6. Ask students: *In what ways does implicit bias differ from overt forms of racism and sexism?* Explain to students that over the course of the lesson, they will consider the ways implicit bias impacts people’s perceptions about men of color.

## WHERE DO STEREOTYPES COME FROM?

1. Ask students: *What are stereotypes?* Elicit and explain the definition of stereotype as follows (project on board/smart board):

**Stereotype** is an oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences.

2. Ask students: *Where do stereotypes come from?* Brainstorm a list of ideas that may include the following:

- Media images (TV shows, video games, movies, apps, advertisements, etc.)
- Parents and family members
- Friends
- Overheard conversations
- Books, articles
- Limited interaction with people of particular group identities

3. Have students turn and talk with a student sitting near them. Have them each share a stereotype they have heard or one that has been directed at them.

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**NOTE:** Remind students that just because they have a stereotype, that doesn’t mean they believe it and as people growing up in this society, we are very susceptible to stereotypical thinking.

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4. Engage students in a brief discussion by asking: *How do stereotypes lead to implicit bias?*

## READING ACTIVITY

1. Divide the class in half by having students count off by 1, 2, 1, 2, etc. or divide them based on seat location.
2. Distribute one article to half the class (#1s) and the other article to the other half (#2s). Give students 10 minutes to read their article.

Group 1: “[Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent Than Whites, Research Finds](#)”

Group 2: "[People See Black Men as Larger, More Threatening Than Same-Sized White Men](#)"

3. Have each group report back about their article by answering the following questions. Call on different students from each group to respond to each of the questions.
  - What did the researchers find?
  - What methodology did the researchers use to come to their conclusion?
  - Is this an example of implicit bias? Why or why not?
  - How did stereotypes play a role?
  - What surprised you about the article?
  - What did you already know?
4. Engage students in a class discussion by asking the following questions:
  - What are the similarities and differences of the two studies?
  - What is your biggest takeaway from reading about these studies?
  - What are your ideas about challenging and dispelling these stereotypes?
  - How does implicit bias lead to discrimination in different institutions such as the criminal justice system, work, law enforcement, school, healthcare, government, houses of workshop, etc.

### WRITING ACTIVITY

As a final activity or a homework assignment, have students write an essay in which they reflect on an experience they have had with implicit bias, either one they experienced personally, one they engaged in (they held the implicit bias) or one that they witnessed or heard/read about. For the essay, students should include responses to the following questions:

- What happened?
- How did you feel?
- What were you thinking?
- How is this situation an example of implicit bias?
- Where did the stereotypes and assumptions (in this case) come from?
- What could have been done differently?
- How could this situation be reversed?

### CLOSING

Have students do a go round where they each share something new they learned during the lesson.

### ADDITIONAL READING

- "[Implicit bias training seeks to counter hidden prejudice in law enforcement](#)" (*The Washington Post*, August 16, 2016)

- [Project Implicit](#) (Harvard University)
- [“Racial Bias Even When We Have Good Intentions”](#) (*The New York Times*, January 3, 2015)
- [Understanding Implicit Bias](#) (The Ohio State University, Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity)
- [“We’re All a Little Biased, Even if We Don’t Know It”](#) (*The New York Times*, October 5, 2016)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Standard 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
Writing
Standard 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## BLACK BOYS VIEWED AS OLDER, LESS INNOCENT THAN WHITES, RESEARCH FINDS

*Police likelier to use force against black children when officers 'dehumanize' blacks, study says*

March 6, 2014

WASHINGTON — Black boys as young as 10 may not be viewed in the same light of childhood innocence as their white peers, but are instead more likely to be mistaken as older, be perceived as guilty and face police violence if accused of a crime, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

“Children in most societies are considered to be in a distinct group with characteristics such as innocence and the need for protection. Our research found that black boys can be seen as responsible for their actions at an age when white boys still benefit from the assumption that children are essentially innocent,” said author Phillip Atiba Goff, PhD, of the University of California, Los Angeles. The study was published online in APA’s [\*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology\*](#)<sup>®</sup>.

Researchers tested 176 police officers, mostly white males, average age 37, in large urban areas, to determine their levels of two distinct types of bias — prejudice and unconscious dehumanization of black people by comparing them to apes. To test for prejudice, researchers had officers complete a widely used psychological questionnaire with statements such as “It is likely that blacks will bring violence to neighborhoods when they move in.” To determine officers’ dehumanization of blacks, the researchers gave them a psychological task in which they paired blacks and whites with large cats, such as lions, or with apes. Researchers reviewed police officers’ personnel records to determine use of force while on duty and found that those who dehumanized blacks were more likely to have used force against a black child in custody than officers who did not dehumanize blacks. The study described use of force as takedown or wrist lock; kicking or punching; striking with a blunt object; using a police dog, restraints or hobbling; or using tear gas, electric shock or killing. Only dehumanization and not police officers’ prejudice against blacks — conscious or not — was linked to violent encounters with black children in custody, according to the study.

The authors noted that police officers’ unconscious dehumanization of blacks could have been the result of negative interactions with black children, rather than the cause of using force with black children. “We found evidence that overestimating age and culpability based on racial differences was linked to dehumanizing stereotypes, but future research should try to clarify the relationship between dehumanization and racial disparities in police use of force,” Goff said.

The study also involved 264 mostly white, female undergraduate students from large public U.S. universities. In one experiment, students rated the innocence of people ranging from infants to 25-year-olds who were black, white or an unidentified race. The students judged children up to 9 years old as equally innocent regardless of race, but considered black children significantly less innocent than other children in every age group beginning at age 10, the researchers found.

The students were also shown photographs alongside descriptions of various crimes and asked to assess the age and innocence of white, black or Latino boys ages 10 to 17. The students overestimated the age of blacks by an average of 4.5 years and found them more culpable than whites or Latinos, particularly when the boys were matched with serious crimes, the study found. Researchers used questionnaires to assess the

participants' prejudice and dehumanization of blacks. They found that participants who implicitly associated blacks with apes thought the black children were older and less innocent.

In another experiment, students first viewed either a photo of an ape or a large cat and then rated black and white youngsters in terms of perceived innocence and need for protection as children. Those who looked at the ape photo gave black children lower ratings and estimated that black children were significantly older than their actual ages, particularly if the child had been accused of a felony rather than a misdemeanor.

"The evidence shows that perceptions of the essential nature of children can be affected by race, and for black children, this can mean they lose the protection afforded by assumed childhood innocence well before they become adults," said co-author Matthew Jackson, PhD, also of UCLA. "With the average age overestimation for black boys exceeding four-and-a-half years, in some cases, black children may be viewed as adults when they are just 13 years old."

**Related Article:** "[The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children](#)," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Feb. 24, 2014; Phillip Atiba Goff, PhD, and Matthew Christian Jackson, PhD; University of California, Los Angeles; Brooke Allison, PhD, and Lewis Di Leone, PhD, National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Boston; Carmen Marie Culotta, PhD, Pennsylvania State University; and Natalie Ann DiTomasso, JD, University of Pennsylvania.

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# PEOPLE SEE BLACK MEN AS LARGER, MORE THREATENING THAN SAME-SIZED WHITE MEN

*Findings could help explain why black men more likely to be shot by police, study says*

March 13, 2017

WASHINGTON — People have a tendency to perceive black men as larger and more threatening than similarly sized white men, according to research published by the American Psychological Association. “Unarmed black men are disproportionately more likely to be shot and killed by police, and often these killings are accompanied by explanations that cite the physical size of the person shot,” said lead author John Paul Wilson, PhD, of Montclair State University. “Our research suggests that these descriptions may reflect stereotypes of black males that do not seem to comport with reality.”

Wilson and his colleagues conducted a series of experiments involving more than 950 online participants (all from the United States) in which people were shown a series of color photographs of white and black male faces of individuals who were all of equal height and weight. The participants were then asked to estimate the height, weight, strength and overall muscularity of the men pictured.

“We found that these estimates were consistently biased. Participants judged the black men to be larger, stronger and more muscular than the white men, even though they were actually the same size,” said Wilson. “Participants also believed that the black men were more capable of causing harm in a hypothetical altercation and, troublingly, that police would be more justified in using force to subdue them, even if the men were unarmed.”

Even black participants displayed this bias, according to Wilson, but while they judged young black men to be more muscular than the young white men, they did not judge them to be more harmful or deserving of force.

In one experiment, where participants were shown identically sized bodies labeled either black or white, they were more likely to describe the black bodies as taller and heavier. In another, the size bias was most pronounced for the men whose facial features looked the most stereotypically black.

“We found that men with darker skin and more stereotypically black facial features tended to be most likely to elicit biased size perceptions, even though they were actually no larger than men with lighter skin and less stereotypical facial features,” said Wilson. “Thus, the size bias doesn’t rely just on a white versus black group boundary. It also varies within black men according to their facial features.”

Black men are disproportionately more likely to be killed in interactions with police, even when unarmed, according to Wilson, and this research suggests that misperceptions of black men’s size might be one contributor to police decisions to shoot. But, he cautioned, the studies do not simulate real-world threat scenarios like those facing actual police officers. More research should be conducted on whether and how this bias operates in potentially lethal situations and other real-world police interactions, Wilson said.

The research was published in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#)<sup>®</sup>. Previous research, also published in this journal, suggested that people view black boys as [older and less innocent](#) than similarly aged white boys, and that [training and experience](#) can help police overcome racial bias in shoot-don’t shoot scenarios.



**Related Article:** “Racial Bias in Judgments of Physical Size and Formidability: From Size to Threat,” by John Wilson, PhD, Montclair University; Kurt Hugenberg, PhD, Miami University; and Nicholas Rule, PhD, University of Toronto; *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Mar. 13, 2017.

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