

As economy declines, African-Americans appear 'blacker,' study shows

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Credit: Anna Langova/public domain

When the economy declines, African Americans are more likely to be seen as "Blacker" and to bear stereotypical features, according to a new study by psychology researchers at New York University. Their findings, which appear in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, suggest that economic duress may spur racial discrimination.

"It is well known that socioeconomic disparities between White Americans and racial minorities expand dramatically under conditions of economic scarcity," says David Amodio, the study's senior author and an associate professor in NYU's Department of Psychology and Center for Neural Science. "Our findings indicate that scarcity changes the way that the people visually perceive another person's race, and that this perceptual distortion can contribute to disparities."

"The study's findings point to a new challenge to discrimination reduction since perceptual effects appear to operate without a person's awareness," adds co-author Amy Krosch, a doctoral candidate in NYU's Department of Psychology. "People typically assume that what they see is an accurate representation of the world, so if their initial perceptions of race are actually distorted by economic factors, people may not even realize the potential for bias."

While a person's race is often thought to be "fixed," prior research has shown that perceptions of race may shift as a result of changes to the perceiver's social goals and motivations. For example, a perceiver's political ideology has been found to influence the extent to which they see biracial individuals as being Black or White.

With this in mind, Krosch and Amodio examined whether exposure to resource scarcity could similarly alter racial perceptions.

To test this, they conducted a series of experiments involving female and male non-Black subjects.

In an initial experiment, subjects completed a questionnaire assessing their concerns about economic competition between Black and White Americans (e.g., "When Blacks make economic gains, Whites lose out economically")—items embedded in a questionnaire that was otherwise irrelevant to race so as to hide the researchers' main interest.

Then, these participants viewed, on a computer screen, a series of 110 morphed faces that ranged in racial content from 100 percent White to 100 percent Black at 11 different increments. Faces were presented one at a time, in random order, and subjects were asked to identify whether each face was Black or White.

If a face was viewed solely on the percentage of its racial content, subjects would, in theory, categorize as "Black" any face whose composition was mostly Black and as "White" any face whose composition was mostly White. However, the results of this experiment yielded noticeably different results.

Specifically, subjects who more strongly believed in resource competition between Whites and Blacks had a lower threshold for identifying mixed-race faces as Black than did subjects who did not hold these zero-sum views.

However, the design of this study only allowed the researchers to test the correlation between perceived scarcity and race perceptions. To test the casual effect of scarcity on such race perceptions, the researchers conducted a second experiment, with a new set of subjects.

Here, they repeated the morphing test, but added a manipulation prior to the viewing that was aimed at establishing different conditions.

Specifically, before subjects saw each morphed face, researchers briefly (20 milliseconds) flashed different types of words on the screen. These "subliminal primes" were scarcity-related words (scarce, resource, sparse, limited), neutral words (fluffy, appetite, scenic, antique), or negative words that were unrelated to scarcity (brutal, confront, odious, fragile). Subjects saw only one category of words prior to viewing the faces.

Their results showed that subjects in the scarcity-primed condition had a

significantly lower threshold for identifying mixed-race faces as Black than those in either the neutral or negative conditions (i.e., they identified a face as "Black" when it contained only 35 percent Black content, whereas subjects in the neutral and negative conditions identified faces as Black when they had at least 41 percent or 43 percent Black content, respectively). In other words, to these subjects, faces became blacker when linked to economic scarcity—and significantly more so than when connected to general negativity.

Next, the researchers sought to test whether the perception of resource scarcity leads people to represent Black Americans in their mind as appearing more dark and "stereotypical" looking—an appearance that has been shown to elicit greater discrimination from White people. The researchers tested this idea in two additional experiments.

In the first, White male and female subjects were told they would be playing an "allocation" game in which money would be divided with a partner. In it, the subjects were the allocators and, as such, learned they would be given an endowment of money to allocate to their partner. In all conditions, subjects were assigned to allocate \$10. However, in a "scarcity" condition, this amount was presented as \$10 out of a possible \$100 (a small portion of the total funds) whereas in the control condition it was presented as \$10 out of a possible \$10 (the maximum portion of the total funds).

While waiting for their partner (the recipient) to come online, subjects were asked to complete "an unrelated task to pretest stimuli for a future face perception study." In fact, this "pretest" was solely designed to assess how subjects viewed faces. In the task, subjects viewed a series of face pairs with subtle variations in facial features and skin tone; they were asked to indicate which face in each of the 400 viewed pairs was "Black."

A composite image made up of these selections revealed subjects' mental representations of a Black person—the way they imagined a Black person as appearing in their mind. The researchers created two composite face images from these data: one representing a Black person under the scarcity condition and the other representing a Black person in the control condition.

When these composite face images were shown to a new sample of White subjects, unaware of the conditions under which the faces were created, these subjects judged the face produced under scarcity as significantly darker and more stereotypically Black than they did the composite produced in the control condition.

In a fourth experiment, the researchers tested the views of White adults, randomly selected in a city park. In it, subjects were told "people often make important decisions about others based on very little information" and that the researchers were interested in how a person's deservingness can be discerned from appearance alone. Subjects viewed the faces created in Study 3, side-by-side, and indicated how they would divide \$15 between them. The subjects allocated significantly less money to the person depicted by the face visualized under scarcity in Study 3 than the control face.

"Together, our results provide strong converging evidence for the role of perceptual biases as a mechanism through which economic scarcity enhances discrimination and contributes to racial disparities," the authors write.

More information: "Economic scarcity alters the perception of race," by Amy R. Krosch and David M. Amodio. *PNAS*:

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