

Racial anxiety may alter time perception for some white Americans, research finds

November 4 2015

Time may appear to slow down for white Americans who feel threatened by an approaching black person, raising questions about the pervasive effects of racial bias or anxiety in the United States, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

In a series of experiments, [white](#) adults viewed faces of white and black people who appeared to be moving toward them on a computer screen. Participants rated the apparent speed or approximate time that each face was on the screen and completed a survey that measured their anxiety when around people of a different race.

White participants who reported more racial anxiety perceived the approaching black faces as moving more slowly or appearing longer on the computer screen than the white faces. Although participants saw both male and female faces, there was no difference in observed effects based on gender. The same effects weren't found when the black faces appeared to be moving farther away, possibly because they weren't perceived as a threat, the study noted.

While racial bias has been alleged in many recent high-profile police killings of unarmed black men, the authors said this is the first study to demonstrate that racial anxiety may even temporarily alter the perception of time and motion. The study was published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"People tend to think that if you felt threatened, you'd think someone

was approaching more quickly," said lead researcher Andreana Kenrick, PhD. "But in the moment, the anxiety of the experience may cause heightened attention and time expansion where the passage of time seems to slow down, similar to car crash survivors who say the accident seemed to take place in slow motion."

These contrasting findings were found in different experiments in the study, said Kenrick, a former postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University where the research was conducted. In one online experiment, 108 white U.S. residents were asked to imagine a white or [black person](#) moving toward them. Participants who reported higher levels of racial anxiety imagined that the black person was moving more quickly. However, in four other experiments where participants were shown images, whites who reported more racial anxiety perceived approaching black faces as moving more slowly than white faces in the present moment, possibly because of time expansion effects.

The experiments included a total of more than 500 white adults who were recruited online, at Princeton University or at a shopping mall in Lawrenceville, New Jersey. There was an almost even split between male and female participants, with varying ages. Since all of the participants were white, the study didn't discern whether black people who report high levels of racial anxiety would experience similar effects for approaching whites.

The findings don't necessarily mean that the participants who reported high levels of racial anxiety were racist or experienced implicit bias, Kenrick said. Those [participants](#) may have been unaccustomed to being around [black](#) people or fearful that they might be accused of being racist in an awkward encounter.

"The study is not necessarily measuring [racial bias](#) but some of the effects of discomfort around people of another race," Kenrick said.

The study findings may have important practical implications, including inaccurate eyewitness identification and the misinterpretation of innocent actions by [black people](#) as threatening, Kenrick said. "If you perceive time as slowing down, then you may feel overconfident about identifying the approaching person later or interpreting their actions," she said. "However, more research is needed to reach firm conclusions."

More information: "Moving While Black: Intergroup Attitudes Influence Judgments of Speed," Andreana C. Kenrick, PhD, and Stacey Sinclair, PhD, Princeton University; Jennifer Richeson, PhD, Northwestern University; Sara C. Verosky, PhD, Oberlin College; Janetta Lun, PhD, University of Maryland; *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, published online Nov. 2, 2015.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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