The Psychological Science on Racial Profiling: Implications for the End Racial Profiling Act

*The End Racial Profiling Act* (ERPA; S.1038/H.R. 2851) would prohibit the use of racial profiling as a means by which law enforcement officers and agencies identify and investigate potential suspects, and would provide funding for training and research to eliminate the use of racial profiling.

Racial Profiling and the Psychology of Stereotyping

- Racial profiling may be defined as the use of race or ethnicity (and associated proxies) by law enforcement officials as one factor among others as a basis for judgment of criminal suspicion (Glaser, in press).

- Racial profiling results, at least in part, from *racial stereotyping*, whereby individuals generalize about the traits associated with ethnic, racial, or other groups (Fiske, 1998). For example, it has been shown that merely seeing a Black person tends to activate thoughts such as ‘criminal,’ ‘aggressive,’ or ‘thug’ (Welch, 2007).

- Importantly, stereotypes often operate implicitly and automatically, meaning that they influence people’s judgments and behaviors *without their conscious awareness or intent* (Devine, 1989). Even those who subscribe to egalitarian values and are not explicitly prejudiced may be influenced by unconscious biases (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1998).

- The relationship between ‘Black’ and ‘crime’ is particularly strong among Americans, and it is bi-directional, meaning that thinking of a concept like ‘crime’ for many people results in thoughts of a Black, rather than White, face (Eberhardt et al., 2004).

- The stressful, dangerous nature of law enforcement work may heighten the use of stereotyping (Schimel et al., 1999). Research has shown that when people are under time pressure or fatigue they are more likely to use stereotypes in making judgments of others (Macrae et al., 1994).

Consequences

- Unconscious stereotypes can lead law enforcement officials to be more likely to perceive a weapon in place of a harmless object when viewing a Black face (Payne, 2001), and to be quicker to shoot a Black person than a White person, a concept known as “shooter bias” (Correll et al., 2007; Glaser & Knowles, 2008). These findings indicate that unconscious biases can lead police to racially profile (treat minorities with greater suspicion) regardless of their conscious intent to be fair.

- Using race or ethnicity as a basis for policing, deliberately or unintentionally, will lead to a disproportionate number of stops, searches, and arrests of members of that racial or ethnic group, regardless of actual crime offending rates (Glaser, 2006).

- Law enforcement individuals with high unconscious bias may be more likely to perceive Black faces as angry (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003). This perception can limit one’s ability to process new information, resulting in an increased risk of discriminatory treatment (Kleider et al., 2010).

Recommendations

- Congress should pass the End Racial Profiling Act, combating the deleterious effects of racial profiling.

- Sec. 304 (b)(1) of the Act pertains to increased funding to law enforcement agencies to support anti-profiling trainings. Preference should be given to agencies that work with established experts to adopt empirically-based
best practices. Recent research indicates that while unconscious racial biases influence officers’ thoughts and actions, effective training can diminish the impact of these biases on actual behavior (Plant & Peruche, 2005).

- Title III of the Act focuses on programs to eliminate racial profiling by law enforcement agencies. The section should encompass an increase in National Institute of Justice (NIJ), National Science Foundation (NSF), and National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) research funding relating to racial profiling in law enforcement. While psychological science has made great progress in understanding police-civilian interactions, more research is needed to better understand the causes of racial profiling, its prevalence, and what interventions can be employed to reduce it (Goff & Kahn, 2012).

References


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