

Tall black men are perceived as more threatening than tall white men, study shows

March 12 2018, by Michael Boren, The Philadelphia Inquirer

The taller a guy is, the more attractive, intelligent, and successful he seems, right?

For white men, sure. For [black men](#), not so much.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina recently discovered that tall black men are more likely to be viewed as threatening than tall white men. In fact, the study found, the taller a black man is, the more threatening he appears.

Neil Hester and Kurt Gray analyzed eight years of data—encompassing more than 1 million cases—from the New York Police Department's controversial stop-and-frisk program. The analysis showed that:

- At 5-foot-4, police stopped 4.5 black men for every white man.
- At 5-foot-10, police stopped 5.3 black men for every white man.
- At 6-foot-4, police stopped 6.2 black men for every white man.

Hester and Gray also had 400 people examine pictures of white and black men and rate them on traits such as competence and threat. Taller black men were rated as more threatening than shorter black men. Taller white men, on the other hand, were not perceived as more threatening than shorter white men. (The researchers focused on men in their study, not women.)

We talked to Hester about the findings. The responses have been edited for length:

Question: This differs from other studies that have shown it's advantageous to be tall. Why is that?

Answer: A lot of work in social psychology and other fields finds that being tall makes men seem more intelligent, more competent, more attractive, better leaders. These papers argue that being tall is beneficial for men in general—when they're actually almost exclusively using ratings of white.

What we find is that these positive findings don't necessarily generalize when you include black.

Q: Why do you think tall black men are viewed as more threatening than tall white men?

A: Black men already face severe threats and stereotyping. They're portrayed in media as being threatening and aggressive. And height is correlated with being more physically powerful or more muscular. So when people see a tall black man, they may draw on their stereotypes of black men as being threatening or having a threatening disposition and combine that with this idea that threat makes you more physically imposing.

This is what leads height to amplify judgments of threat for black men, but not for white men, who don't face these stereotypes of being threatening or aggressive.

Q: Do you think these findings reflect white privilege?

A: I do. These findings move us toward a more nuanced understanding

of how white privilege works, in that the same traits can be beneficial for [white men](#) but detrimental to black men.

Q: What can people learn from these findings?

A: They can learn that how we judge or stereotype groups is a really complex process where we combine lots of aspects of someone's identity: their race, their gender, their age, how tall they are, how much they weigh. This combination produces unique patterns of stereotyping and discrimination.

It's interesting that aspects of our identity that maybe we don't think of as being that central to our identity, like our height, can play such a strong role in how others perceive us.

Q: What surprised you most about the findings?

A: The magnitude of the effect in the New York stop-and-frisk program ... for shorter vs. taller men surprised me. I wouldn't have thought it made that much of a difference.

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Citation: Tall black men are perceived as more threatening than tall white men, study shows (2018, March 12) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-tall-black-men-threatening-white.html>

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