

Children associate white, but not black, men with 'brilliant' stereotype, new study finds

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The stereotype that associates being "brilliant" with White men more than White women is shared by children regardless of their own race, finds a team of psychology researchers. By contrast, its study shows,

children do not apply this stereotype to Black men and women.

"Among adults, gender stereotypes apply differently to men and [women](#) depending on their [race](#)," explains Andrei Cimpian, an associate professor in New York University's Department of Psychology and the senior author of the study, which appears in the *Journal of Social Issues*. "That's why it is important to consider how gender and race intersect when examining [children's](#) gender stereotypes about [intellectual ability](#)."

"Our research indicates that the [stereotype](#) associating brilliance with White men more than White women is likely widespread—but also that children acquire no such stereotype about Black men and women. In fact, they may see Black women as more likely to be brilliant than they do Black men."

Previously, Cimpian and his colleagues found that, by the age of 6, girls become less likely than boys to associate brilliance with their own gender and are more likely to avoid activities said to require brilliance.

However, previous research on this stereotype has not considered how its acquisition might differ depending on the race of the men and women targeted by the stereotype—or depending on children's own race. In other words, does the "brilliance" stereotype extend across racial backgrounds?

Answering this question is important, the researchers note, because prior work by Cimpian and his collaborators has suggested that this "brilliance" stereotype may be a key reason for the gender gaps observed in many prestigious careers where intellectual talent is valued, including those in science and technology.

In their *Journal of Social Issues* study, the scientists posed a series of questions to more than 200 5- and 6-year-olds from New York City

public elementary schools, comparing their assumptions about the intellectual abilities of White men and women with their assumptions about the intellectual abilities of Black men and women.

To gauge this, the researchers showed the children photographs of eight pairs of adults in a naturalistic setting (e.g., in a home, in an office), one pair at a time. The two people in each of the eight pairs were a woman and a man of the same race (four Black male/female pairs, four White male/female pairs). Children were told that one of the two individuals in each pair was "really, really smart" and were then asked to guess which one the smart individual was.

These results showed that, overall, children associate White men, more so than White women, with brilliance. The researchers also compared White children's responses with those of children of color (primarily Latinx, Black, and Asian) and found that they were largely in agreement on this topic.

However, children's views about the intellectual abilities of Black men and Black women were quite different. In fact, the researchers found, children generally see Black men as less brilliant than they do Black women.

"Overall, these findings reinforce the conclusion that the [gender](#)-brilliance stereotype is acquired relatively early on in life, but they also suggest that this stereotype may 'look' different depending on the ethnicity of the women and men that children are reasoning about," observes Jilana Jaxon, a co-first author on the paper and an NYU doctoral student at the time of the research.

"Understanding this nuance of how race modifies [gender stereotypes](#) is important," adds Ryan Lei, a co-first author on the paper and an NYU postdoctoral researcher at the time of the study. "Research such as this is

essential if we want to combat the effects of these stereotypes on all children's educational and career aspirations."

More information: *Journal of Social Issues*, [DOI: 10.1111/josi.12352](https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12352)

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