

Racial stereotypes shape our perceptions of risk-takers as reckless or responsible, new study finds

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Do others see you as a reckless risk-taker who behaves compulsively without weighing potential consequences? Or a courageous risk-taker

who takes responsible risks?

A groundbreaking psychology study by Northwestern University provides the first evidence that perceptions about risk-takers are influenced by racial stereotypes.

Risk-taking [behavior](#) can be viewed broadly as [responsible](#) or reckless. In a series of experiments, the researchers found study participants tended to associate responsible risk-taking with white stereotypes and reckless risk-taking with Black stereotypes.

The study's lead author is Northwestern alumnus James Wages '21, now an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Central Arkansas. The senior researcher is Sylvia Perry, associate professor of psychology at Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences and a faculty fellow in the University's Institute for Policy Research. Perry is the principal investigator in the Social Cognition and Intergroup Processes (SCIP) Lab, where Wages' conducted research as a doctoral student.

"If on average, a Black (relative to a white) person is perceived to engage in more reckless risk-taking, this could translate into someone being less willing to take a chance on that person (such as investing resources in them), or more likely to assume that they will make an impulsive decision that could lead to a negative outcome," Perry said.

"Reckless Gambles and Responsible Ventures: Racialized Prototypes of Risk-Taking," published Nov. 15 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, grew out of a recurrent theme in Wages's research at Northwestern.

"Relative to [white men](#), Black men tend to be perceived as more reckless in a variety of settings, even though there is little to no evidence that they are bigger risk-takers," he said. Finding a gap in the research, Wages and

the research team planned a series of five experiments to learn how people perceive responsible and reckless risk-takers and whether racial stereotype content would map to each type.

The studies included perception studies of faces and behavioral traits, a reverse correlation study of composites of faces, an economics investment game to test levels of trust, and an exercise to judge which type of risk-taker posted stereotypically Black or white tweets.

Each study involved on average approximately 270 participants, mostly white residents of the U.S., and evenly divided between women and men.

Across all five studies, the researchers found the reckless risk-takers were perceived to have racial stereotypes of Black males embedded (such as, impulsive, quick-tempered, or unreliable). They also found responsible risk-takers were associated with more positive and unequal racial stereotypes for whites (intelligent, ambitious).

According to Wages, using five different experimental methods was a way to approach the same question from different perspectives.

"Finding a consistent pattern across the experiments provides greater confidence that the findings were not just an artifact of one method but a more prevalent phenomenon," Wages said.

Findings and implications

"One of the biggest takeaways of this study is we have stereotypes about risk-takers and those [stereotypes](#) have racial associations," Wages said.

"When we think about the various racial [biases](#) that exist when we think about others, one of those biases we should be aware of is [reckless](#)

versus responsible risk-taking," he said. "This is something that had not been documented previously, yet such a bias could potentially influence our social perceptions, judgments and behaviors in situations in which the assessment of risk in others is common and consequential, such as in health care, financial lending and policing."

Perry argues the study findings have implications in a variety of social contexts where risk assessment impacts decision-making.

"Who is more likely to get a home loan at a favorable rate? Who do doctors assume will be more likely to adhere to medical recommendations, and thus more worthy of certain medical procedures or resources? Who is more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt in the criminal justice system? Our work suggests that people's racial biases in [risk](#) perceptions may have consequences for these outcomes," Perry said.

More information: James E. Wages et al, Reckless gambles and responsible ventures: Racialized prototypes of risk-taking., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000287](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000287)

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